



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS

WEDNESDAY — 18 MAY 2022



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Events, Opportunities

HEADLINE	05/18 White House virus briefings return
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/18/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases
GIST	<p>The White House will hold a coronavirus briefing on Wednesday after a six-week hiatus, as caseloads and hospitalizations climb around the country and the Biden administration signaled that it would extend its declaration of Covid-19 as a public health emergency.</p> <p>The briefing — scheduled for 10:45 a.m. Eastern — will be the first formal on-camera session led by President Biden’s new coronavirus response coordinator, Dr. Ashish K. Jha. Dr. Jha has spent much of his first month in office trying to persuade Congress to authorize billions of dollars in new emergency aid for the pandemic response, but the administration’s request is stalled on Capitol Hill. A senior administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity to preview Wednesday’s coronavirus briefing, said Dr. Jha would again call on Congress to release the funding, and would warn that the nation was seeing a “significant increase” in infections — a sign that Covid is not over.</p> <p>On Monday, the administration quietly let pass a deadline for lifting the public health emergency, which has allowed the government to take steps like offering Americans free Covid-19 vaccines, tests and treatments; barring states from canceling people’s Medicaid coverage; and expanding access to telehealth appointments. It has also allowed hospitals to get paid more for treating Medicare patients who have Covid.</p> <p>The public health emergency was set to expire on July 15, but the administration promised to give states and health providers 60 days’ notice before lifting it. That deadline passed Monday with no such notification. Public health experts and hospital officials praised the extension.</p> <p>“We’re seeing rising cases and hospitalizations and testing positivity rates; now is not the time to end these flexibilities that allow great access to care,” said Ashley Thompson, senior vice president for policy development at the American Hospital Association. “We are not out of the woods yet.”</p> <p>The Biden administration is bracing for a surge of cases that some experts say could mirror the wave in December and January, after the highly contagious Omicron variant emerged. At the peak of that surge, the nation was recording an average of more than 800,000 new infections a day, and experts believe many more cases were not reported.</p> <p>The big unanswered question, experts say, is whether the rise in cases that is already well underway will be followed by a rise in hospitalizations and deaths. According to a database maintained by The New York Times, the daily average of new coronavirus infections reported in the United States has surpassed 100,000 for the first time since Feb. 20. That figure is up 61 percent from two weeks ago.</p> <p>Hospitalizations are rising, but more slowly; they are up 25 percent over the past two weeks. Deaths are continuing to decline, but deaths are a lagging indicator and that trend could reverse.</p> <p>“We could be entering a period where we have an increased number of cases but a substantially decreased severity of illness, so that we see fewer hospitalizations and many fewer deaths,” said Michael T. Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. “But as absolutely uncomfortable and unsatisfactory as this is, we just don’t know what this virus is going to throw at us in the next 90 days.”</p> <p>That poses a messaging challenge for the White House, he said: “What we need to do is not whipsaw from, ‘We’re over,’ to ‘Oh my God, how bad it could be.’ ”</p> <p>In the six weeks since the last formal White House briefing, conducted on April 5 by Dr. Jha’s predecessor, Jeffrey D. Zients, mask mandates have been lifted on airplanes and other forms of public transit, and Mr. Biden has been consumed by other crises, including the war in Ukraine and, now, the racist shooting in Buffalo.</p>

	<p>Several experts said in interviews that they were eager for the return of the briefings, which have typically included Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, Mr. Biden’s top medical adviser, and Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Both will join Dr. Jha on Wednesday.</p> <p>White House officials offered no explanation for the six-week break, other than to say that Dr. Jha was reconstituting the Covid response team after a string of departures when Mr. Zients left.</p> <p>Dr. Jha, a former dean of the Brown University School of Public Health who was a go-to expert for media outlets before he joined the administration, has appeared frequently on television in recent weeks, as has Dr. Fauci. Dr. Walensky held her own Covid briefing at the end of April. But such appearances do not carry the same weight as formal briefings with the imprimatur of the White House.</p> <p>“I think it would be important for us to get more direction from Dr. Walensky and Dr. Fauci as to what we should be doing right now,” said Dr. Janis M. Orlowski, the chief health care officer at the Association of American Medical Colleges.</p> <p>Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, an oncologist, medical ethicist and University of Pennsylvania professor who led an effort to draft a new pandemic strategy called “The Next Normal,” was more blunt in calling for the White House to improve its Covid communications strategy: “They need to step up their game.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/18 Sanctions stymie Russia energy industry
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/18/business/russia-energy-oil-gazprom-lng.html
GIST	<p>It was to be a hugely ambitious project on the frigid Gulf of Ob, in Russia’s Far North, a steppingstone in Moscow’s rising ambitions to be a power in liquefied natural gas much as it is in oil and gas delivered by pipeline.</p> <p>When President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia launched his war on Ukraine, the \$21 billion project known as Arctic LNG 2 was well underway with dozens of wells drilled, an airport built and most of the equipment ordered.</p> <p>Now, though, European Union sanctions that prohibit the sale of gas liquefaction equipment to Russia have thrown the giant complex into doubt. The sanctions mean, at best, that just one of three planned liquefaction facilities at Arctic LNG is likely to be completed anytime soon, analysts say.</p> <p>The project’s key international backer, TotalEnergies, recently wrote off its \$4.1 billion investment. It is “difficult to believe that it can be built with the sanctions,” Patrick Pouyanne, the TotalEnergies chief executive, told analysts in late April.</p> <p>The problems go far beyond L.N.G.</p> <p>In coming years Russia is likely to be forced into retreat across a wide spectrum of energy. Future growth for its oil and gas exports — for decades the backbone of the country’s economy — are now deeply uncertain. The shock waves from Ukraine even extend into nuclear power, where Finland recently shelved a deal for Russia to build an estimated 7 billion euro (\$7.4 billion) reactor.</p> <p>“Russia is going to be a greatly diminished international player, there is no question about it,” said Matt Sagers, vice president and head of Russian and Caspian energy at S & P Global, a financial services firm.</p> <p>Russia will probably find markets for at least some of its oil and gas; in April Mr. Putin said that while the country may lose traditional buyers, it would find more at home and abroad. But it may gradually lose influence in the industry, becoming a pariah to former international partners like the major international oil companies.</p>

Some analysts also say it is hard to see how Moscow can remain a co-chair, with Saudi Arabia, of the oil producers' organization known as OPEC Plus. So far, though, Saudi officials and others are sticking with Russia with an eye toward preserving cohesion in the group for a distant future date when the world is oversupplied with oil rather than worried about shortages.

L.N.G. is effectively a proxy for Russia's energy ambitions. It is fast-growing, largely because the chilled liquid can be transported around the world on ships, allowing a country like Russia, whose gas is now delivered largely by pipelines to increasingly hostile customers in Europe, to reach any market with a suitable terminal. Handling the chilled gas is also technically challenging.

L.N.G. is still in its infancy in Russia, but Moscow aimed to vie with world leaders: Qatar, Australia and the United States. It would capitalize on its enormous gas resources and its relationships with Exxon Mobil and Shell as well as TotalEnergies, which owned 10 percent of Arctic LNG 2. All are big players in liquefied gas. (L.N.G. imports have been growing at about 7 percent per year.)

Such ambitions have now been dashed. Analysts at S & P Global now estimate that Russia will likely have only half the L.N.G. gas capacity it was targeting by the end of the decade. An Exxon Mobil liquefied gas project on Sakhalin Island, in Russia's Far East, has been shelved, and Shell has said it would exit Russia's first L.N.G. facility, also on Sakhalin Island.

In oil and gas, the setbacks can be divided into two broad categories. With international oil giants like Shell, BP and Exxon Mobil having announced their intention to leave Russia, the Russian industry will lose access to advanced technologies and capital. For example, Russia's gas giant Gazprom has been working with Shell on using chemical mixes to boost oil extraction in a project called Salym, which Shell is now exiting.

In the past, Russia's vast fields have generally been easy to tap, but after decades of pumping, the remaining petroleum will be harder to extract. "The longer Russia is shunned from the system, the greater the downside risk for production," Oswald Clint, an analyst at Bernstein, a research firm, wrote in a recent report.

But a more immediate concern is the fact that Russia has been forced to shut down oil production because of the sanctions and the reluctance of buyers to handle Russian crude and oil products.

In one sign of such distress, the oil project operated by Exxon Mobil on Sakhalin Island in the Russian Far East has shipped no oil so far in May, according to Kpler, a firm that tracks energy shipping. Exxon Mobil declared force majeure at Sakhalin, meaning it could no longer perform its obligations because of conditions outside of the company's control. Exxon said that it was having difficulty "complying with its obligations" and "conducting operations at the required level of international standards."

Russia does not have a large oil storage system, and so when it is unable to export oil, it is forced to throttle back wells or completely shut them down. There is nowhere to put the oil. Russian oil output declined by 900,000 barrels a day, or 10 percent, in April compared with March. The International Energy Agency, the Paris-based group, said recently that the amount of reduced production could approach 3 million barrels a day later this year.

And in a sign that more taps may be closed, analysts at Kayrros, a research firm, said that oil on tankers has been increasing rapidly. This suggests "Russia might again be finding it more difficult to dispose of its crude," they said.

Russia has had some success in finding buyers for oil that otherwise might have gone to Europe and the United States. Flows to India have ramped up. Viktor Katona, an analyst at Kpler, said that China, where energy consumption has fallen off due to Covid lockdowns, appears to be stepping up its buying.

Russia is also making money, thanks to high petroleum prices. Analysts at S & P Global estimate that Russia made about \$26 billion on sales of natural gas to Europe from the beginning of the war in Ukraine

	<p>on Feb. 24 through the end of April, more than three times the period a year earlier. Of this total, about a quarter went directly to the government and about half went to Gazprom, the gas monopoly. Around \$5 billion went to Asian and Western L.N.G. investors. (Tax exemptions meant to encourage L.N.G. investment mean the chilled gas now produces little revenue for the Russian government.)</p> <p>Analysts say it would be wrong to underestimate Russia's oil industry. It was struggling when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, but righted itself with the aid of Western companies and has since absorbed technologies like fracking and horizontal drilling. Despite sanctions imposed to punish Mr. Putin's takeover of Crimea in 2014, Russia managed to increase production to a peak in 2019.</p> <p>Novatek, the Russian company developing Arctic LNG 2, has even deployed a largely homegrown L.N.G. technology on an earlier project with TotalEnergies, called Yamal L.N.G. But the process has encountered problems and it remains unclear whether it can work at full commercial scale. Novatek declined to comment.</p> <p>"I wouldn't say they are finished as a petroleum power," Mr. Clint, the Bernstein analyst, said in an interview. "But they are certainly knocked down the ranking for a good period of time."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/18 Kyiv court: Russia soldier pleads guilty
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/18/world/russia-ukraine-war-news#a-russian-soldier-accused-of-killing-a-civilian-pleads-guilty-in-a-kyiv-court
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — A Russian soldier pleaded guilty in a Kyiv court on Wednesday to having shot a civilian, in the first trial Ukraine has conducted for an act that could be considered a war crime since Russia launched its full-scale invasion.</p> <p>The soldier, Sgt. Vadim Shyshimarin, pleaded guilty to shooting a 62-year-old man on a bicycle in the village of Chupakhivka in the Sumy region, about 200 miles east of Kyiv, four days after Russia's full-scale invasion began on Feb. 24.</p> <p>Asked by the presiding judge whether he accepted his guilt, Sergeant Shyshimarin said: "Yes. Fully yes."</p> <p>The trial has drawn widespread media and public interest. On Wednesday, the courtroom and an overflow room were crowded with members of the local and international news media, and the trial is being broadcast on YouTube.</p> <p>The prosecutor, Andriy Sinyuk, described the hearing as an "unprecedented procedure" in which "a serviceman of a different country is accused of murdering a civilian of Ukraine."</p> <p>The Kremlin spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, dismissed the proceedings on Wednesday, telling reporters that accusations leveled against Russian soldiers by Ukraine were "simply fake or staged."</p> <p>"We still have no information," Mr. Peskov said. "And the ability to provide assistance due to the lack of our diplomatic mission there is also very limited."</p> <p>The hearing takes place as Ukraine seeks the transfer of its own soldiers who were evacuated from the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol in recent days. The fighters, more than 50 of whom were "seriously injured," are currently in Russian custody.</p> <p>Ukraine hopes to trade the soldiers for Russian prisoners of war. Neither Moscow nor Kyiv has released details about a potential prisoner exchange. But any prisoner transfer could complicate the efforts of Ukrainian prosecutors to hold Russians suspected of war crimes accountable.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/18 Philippines seek stronger ties with China
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SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-marcos-says-china-ties-set-shift-higher-gear-under-his-presidency-2022-05-18/
GIST	<p>MANILA, May 18 (Reuters) - Philippines president-elect Ferdinand Marcos Jr on Wednesday said his country's ties with China will expand and "shift to a higher gear" when he takes power, signalling intent to advance outgoing leader Rodrigo Duterte's pro-Beijing agenda.</p> <p>Marcos, who won last week's election by a landslide, said he held "very substantial" talks by phone on Wednesday with Chinese President Xi Jinping, who assured him of support for his "independent foreign policy", and agreed to hold more comprehensive discussions.</p> <p>The 64-year-old son and namesake of the notorious former dictator said Xi also acknowledged his late father's role in opening diplomatic relations between China and former U.S. colony the Philippines.</p> <p>"The way forward is to expand our relationship not only diplomatic, not only trade, but also in culture, even in education, even in knowledge, even in health, to address whatever minor disagreements that we have right now," Marcos said in a statement.</p> <p>"I told him, we must not allow what conflicts or difficulties we have now between our two countries to become historically important."</p> <p>The Philippines and China have had a rocky relationship in recent years over Beijing's vast territorial claims and conduct of its coast guard and fishing fleet in the South China Sea, through which at least \$3.4 trillion of annual trade passes.</p> <p>Many analysts expect Marcos to seek stronger ties with Beijing, but say maintaining close relations with defence ally Washington will be essential in keeping the military and the public onside in a country with historically strong links to the United States.</p> <p>Their phone conversation focused on bilateral ties and regional development, the Chinese embassy in Manila said in a separate statement.</p> <p>Xi said both countries should carry forward their friendship, grasp the general trend and follow through the blueprint for bilateral friendly cooperation, the embassy added.</p> <p>Marcos won the presidency with nearly 59% of the votes last week. He will take office late in June.</p> <p>China was among the first to congratulate Marcos, who was the first win a presidential election by an outright majority since a 1986 revolution that toppled his late father's two-decade dictatorship.</p> <p>Kurt Campbell, the White House coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, last week said the United States would seek early engagement with the Marcos administration, but said there were "historical considerations" that could pose challenges.</p> <p>Marcos said Xi had expressed a desire to talking privately.</p> <p>"We are both looking forward to having further dialogue," Marcos said.</p> <p>"He said both of us should talk, without the others."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/18 Sri Lanka to default on debt
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sri-lanka-default-debt-no-money-fuel-minister-says-2022-05-18/
GIST	<p>COLOMBO, May 18 (Reuters) - Sri Lanka is expected to be placed into default by rating agencies on Wednesday after the non-payment of coupons on two of its sovereign bonds, while the energy minister said the country had run out of money to pay for fuel.</p>

An economic crisis unprecedented in the country's history since independence in 1948 has led to a critical shortage of foreign exchange, that saw it miss two coupon payments on sovereign bonds on April 18.

Sri Lanka has already said it is unable to make the coupon payments, and a 30-day grace period ends on Wednesday.

S&P has said the ratings on the bonds, maturing in 2023 and 2028, have already been cut to 'default' and the country's overall rating could be further cut to 'D' on confirmation of the non-payment after the grace period ends. [read more](#)

Sri Lanka currently has no dollars to pay for petrol shipments, Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera told parliament, appealing to people to stop queuing for the next two days.

A petrol shipment has been at Colombo port since 28 March but the government has been unable pay, he added.

"There aren't enough dollars available to open letters of credit," he said.

"We are working to find funds but petrol will not be available at least until the weekend. The very small reserve stock of petrol is being released for essential services like ambulances," he said.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said on Wednesday the country had secured \$160 million in bridge financing from the World Bank, but it was not clear if the funds could be used for fuel payments.

"The statistics have gone haywire," he said. "But the reality is we don't even have \$1 million."

Hit hard by the pandemic, rising oil prices and populist tax cuts, Sri Lanka's dire economic situation has led to spiralling inflation and shortages of essential supplies, bringing thousands of onto the streets in protest.

Violence between pro- and anti-government factions and police left nine dead and more than 300 injured last week, and was followed by the resignation of former prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa.

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HEADLINE	05/18 Lost decade for stocks?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/this-could-be-a-lost-decade-for-stocks-11652871781
GIST	<p>U.S. stocks could well bounce back from their awful start to the year. How they do in the longer run is another matter.</p> <p>Heading into 2022, expectations were great. A Natixis survey of individual investors in 24 countries in 2021 showed U.S. investors had the highest projections of the group at 17.5% annual returns going forward. The difference between that and historical experience is stark: Compared with long-term annual U.S. stock returns of around 9.8%, a \$10,000 investment would grow to about \$50,000 in 10 years instead of \$25,000. But even stocks' more restrained long-run returns seem aspirational now.</p> <p>Investors' optimism is easier to understand if one looks at the 10 years through the end of 2021, during which the compound annual return of the benchmark S&P 500 was a very good 16.6%—not so far from what those surveyed extrapolated. Its components need closer scrutiny, though.</p> <p>Pundits love to talk about earnings growth, but it hardly accounted for the excellent decade that ended last December. S&P 500 earnings per share grew at an average 7.7% a year, according to figures from Semper Augustus Investments Group. That rapid pace was achieved when corporate profit margins went from an already respectable 9.2% to a nosebleed 13.4%. Returns would have been about 4 percentage points lower if margins hadn't expanded.</p>

With labor and material costs rising and the Trump administration's corporate tax cuts already behind us, it isn't unreasonable to expect that margin boost to stall or reverse. Even during the tech and housing booms, it was unusual for S&P 500 operating-profit margins to exceed 9%.

More important was the price that investors were willing to pay for a dollar of earnings. That went from a multiple of 13 times to 23.6 times over the decade ended Dec. 31, 2021. A multiple of 15 to 16 is about the historical average.

Guessing what prices investors will pay in the future, and when or whether they will revert to the mean, is notoriously hard. The recent selloff could be the early stages of that adjustment, though, according to Christopher Bloomstran, a value-investing veteran who is president of Semper Augustus. He wrote in an email interview that tightening monetary policy is likely to be the catalyst.

"The Fed has a perfect record popping bubbles. They aren't likely to fail this time," Mr. Bloomstran wrote.

Another prominent value investor, Jeremy Grantham, co-founder of the asset manager GMO, wrote in January that U.S. stocks had entered their fourth "superbubble" of the past 100 years and that he expected them to drop by half. In addition to quantitative reasons such as statistical deviation from long-term trends, he cited a more subjective historical cue akin to ringing a bell near the top—"crazy" speculation, this time in meme stocks, EV makers, cryptocurrencies and NFTs.

As sour as the mood has seemed lately, the S&P 500 would drop by another 45% or so if both margins and price/earnings multiples reverted to their long-run averages—about the decline Mr. Grantham's analysis suggests—taking the benchmark back to a level it first crossed five years ago.

That sounds alarmist, but stocks' level in 2031 could be the same whether Mr. Grantham is correct or not about a sharp bear market. The alternative could be milder selloffs and recoveries along the lines of what we have experienced recently that lead stocks exactly nowhere. It isn't the journey, it's the destination.

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HEADLINE	05/18 EIA: summer electric bill higher price
SOURCE	https://www.foxbusiness.com/lifestyle/energy-bills-summer-2022
GIST	<p>Summer is right around the corner, which means jamming up those air conditioning units. However, with the cost of energy rising, cooling down the house in the midst of the sweltering summer heat is going to cost more than usual.</p> <p>The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimated that on average there will be an increase of 3.9% in the price of electricity for U.S. households this summer. For the entire summer, the agency projects that the average household is expected to spend 0.9% more for electricity compared to summer 2021, according to the EIA.</p> <p>"The higher price is largely driven by supply and demand," Nick Loris, vice president of public policy for C3 Solutions. "Particularly with natural gas, which provides 38% of our electricity needs, we've been operating in an environment of constrained supply and higher demand."</p> <p>When the pandemic hit, "prices were low and remained low, so there was not much of an incentive to supply more," Loris said. "As the economy opened back up, demand increased and outpaced supplies. Russia's invasion of Ukraine made things worse."</p> <p>In particular, experts "are warning it could be a particularly expensive summer for the northeast," Loris added.</p> <p>The EIA, which broke down estimated price increases per region, estimated that New England will get hit the hardest. Households in the region are estimated to pay 16.4% more this summer, according to the</p>

agency's estimates. Meanwhile, households in the Mid-Atlantic are projected to pay 8.4% more this summer, and households in the South Atlantic are estimated to spend 6.5% more, according to the EIA.

Utility companies are already issuing warnings to customers ahead of the summer months.

"With New England's heavy reliance on natural gas to fuel electricity needs, the continued high global demand for natural gas and rising prices worldwide are also driving increases to electric supply rates here," Eversource Energy, which serves customers in Connecticut, New Hampshire and Massachusetts, told FOX Business.

On top of that, the company also noted that the electric supply rate for customers is regularly adjusted twice per year, and the next proposed adjustment, which has to be approved by regulators in each respective state, is coming up on July 1 for Connecticut and Massachusetts and on Aug 1. for New Hampshire.

For instance, in Connecticut, the current rate is 11.57 cents per kWh. The proposed rate would be pushed up to 12.19 cents per kWh, pending approval.

"As a regulated energy distribution company, we purchase power for our customers on the competitive wholesale market — with prices driven by increases or decreases in demand along with other global market forces," Eversource Energy said. "This cost is directly passed through to customers with no profit to the company and is subject to review and approval by the appropriate regulatory agency in each of our respective states."

Additionally, the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (PUC) issued a warning earlier this month that "most utilities will be adjusting their prices for electric generation on June 1." Many customers, "will see sharp increases in energy costs as summer approaches, ranging between 6% and 45% depending on their electric utility," the PUC continued.

This price change and increased use of electricity typically seen during summer "make this a very good time for consumers to evaluate their energy options," PUC said.

The PUC is encouraging customers to "carefully review their electric bills to understand the rates they will be paying" ahead of June 1.

Meanwhile, Consolidated Edison Inc., which provides energy for roughly 10 million people who live in [New York City](#) and Westchester County, also estimated that summer bills, between June through September, will be higher.

The company estimated that residential bills in New York City will be between 11-12% higher than last year. In Westchester County, summer bills for residential customers are projected to be about 15% higher.

Last year, a New York City residential customer who was using 350 kwh per month from June to September had an average monthly bill of \$104.05, according to ConEd.

Meanwhile, a residential customer in Westchester County using 500 kwh per month during the same period had an average monthly bill of \$133.02, according to ConEd.

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HEADLINE	05/17 China steps up subversion global order
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/may/17/china-steps-subversion-global-order-power-grab-us/
GIST	China's ruling Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army are subverting the rules-based international order and increasing global efforts to expand power, the U.S. admiral in charge of Pacific forces told a House hearing Tuesday.

Adm. John Aquilino, commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, discussed China's strategic and military goals for rapidly becoming a global superpower in detailed written testimony.

"The PRC seeks to become a global military power and acquire the ability to seize Taiwan, while developing conventional weapons that can reach the U.S. homeland," Adm. Aquilino said, using the acronym for the People's Republic of China. The comments were contained in a 33-page prepared statement before the House Appropriations defense subcommittee.

The admiral appeared before a closed hearing of the subcommittee. [His](#) written testimony, however, was posted on the subcommittee website. The admiral's statement constitutes the Pentagon's latest assessment of its chief rival's current capabilities, as President Biden prepares for a trip to Asia this week to meet with U.S. allies on the security landscape in East Asia.

"The PRC also seeks to establish a network of overseas military installations that would extend its reach, allowing support for an increasingly global People's Liberation Army (PLA) capable of power projection far beyond the Indo-Pacific."

The Chinese are using a combination of economic and military influence that can be seen in "coercive economic actions the PRC has taken against U.S. allies and like-minded partners," he said.

He said one example was the "One Belt, One Road" program of overseas infrastructure development and financing that critics say is a means to expand Chinese influence and access around the world. The Chinese military-civil "fusion" program of acquiring technology and expertise has made academic research cooperation with Beijing a potential national security danger, the admiral said.

"The PRC is in execution of a dedicated campaign utilizing all forms of national power to uproot the rules-based international order in ways that benefit themselves at the expense of all others," Adm. Aquilino said in prepared testimony. "Their will and their resources to contest long standing international norms are evident across every regional and functional domain."

Adm. Aquilino outlined the large-scale Chinese military build-up of new warships, aircraft, space and cyber weapons, a build-up the U.S. and its allies have watched nervously. President Xi Jinping has directed that most elements of the military upgrade be completed by 2027 in what the admiral called the most extensive military buildup by any nation since World War II.

The PLA now has around 350 ships and submarines with 130 surface warships making it the largest navy in the world, and is expected to grow to 420 battle-force ships by 2025, the U.S. admiral said.

The PLA also now boasts the largest air force in the region with more than half its warplanes advanced, "fourth-generation" aircraft or better. Production is beginning now for a new fifth-generation J-20 fighter.

Nuclear capable H-6N bombers are being added along with new ground-based and mobile long-range missiles.

"In addition to an extensive arsenal of advanced ballistic missiles, the PLA rocket force is pursuing land-attack, supersonic cruise missiles and other advanced weapons," Adm. Aquilino said. "The PLA's new generation of mobile missiles uses multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles (MIRVs) and highly capable hypersonic glide vehicles (HGV) designed to evade U.S. missile defenses."

Space weapons in the PLA arsenal include directed-energy weapons, electronic jammers, a ground-launched kinetic kill missile and orbiting strike capabilities.

Space arms are intended to deny the U.S. military and those of allies access to space during a crisis or conflict.

“PLA development of cyber capabilities are in direct support of intelligence collection against the United States, advanced PLA modernization goals, and intellectual property theft,” Adm. Aquilino said. “From denial-of-service attacks to physical disruptions of critical infrastructure, the PRC desires to shape decisionmaking and disrupt military operations at the initial stages and throughout conflict.”

China has made the takeover of self-ruled Taiwan a high priority and Adm. Aquilino said China has “drastically increased” the size and sophistication of its military training for an assault on the island.

“Beijing has intensified pressure on Taiwan, using diplomatic, informational, military and economic tools to isolate Taiwan from the international community in an attempt to force submission and weaken resistance,” he told lawmakers in his prepared testimony.

In the South China Sea, China has made “illegal maritime claims” as part of efforts to take over the waterway, Adm. Aquilino said. Disputed islands are now armed with anti-ship missiles, anti-aircraft weapons and jamming gear, he revealed.

To counter Chinese aggression and deter a future conflict, Adm. Aquilino outlined the Indo-Pacific Command’s strategy he called “seize the initiative.”

“This approach requires the joint force to think, act, and operate differently by synchronizing our operations, realigning our posture, and advancing our warfighting capabilities,” he said.

The strategy will require a buildup of military power in the Pacific and also joint operations with allies in the region.

“‘Seize the initiative’ is the first step in building enduring advantages that ensure U.S. forces are postured in the right place, with the right capabilities to deter our security challengers in near-, mid-, and long-term competition,” Adm. Aquilino said.

The admiral’s written testimony did not specify the exact types of weapons and forces that are needed to support the strategy.

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HEADLINE	05/17 SPD consent decree compliance milestone
SOURCE	https://spdblotter.seattle.gov/2022/05/17/chief-diaz-on-spds-consent-decree-compliance-milestone/
GIST	<p>The Federal Court Monitor’s recent assessment, that the Seattle Police Department has sustained full and effective compliance under the Consent Decree, marks a significant milestone in modern policing. SPD has become the first department in the new era of Consent Decrees to reach this point. We thank the Monitor, the court, the Department of Justice, and the many in Seattle’s diverse communities who have challenged and supported us. Yet while we celebrate this achievement and look forward to completing the remaining commitments outlined in the Monitoring Plan for this year, we also remain mindful that this is by no means an endpoint.</p> <p>For any organization, reform should be an ever-evolving process, and just as the massive calls for change and accountability in policing in 2020 and the continuing impacts of the pandemic have informed our approach to crowd management, deployment, and staffing efficiency, we pledge our continuing commitment to ensure that a culture of ongoing review and reform remains cemented in the DNA of this department. Next week we will roll out our 45-day Before the Badge training program for new recruits, rooted in community engagement and officer wellness. In keeping with the Consent Decree, our department remains committed to robust officer wellness reforms, which enable our officers to excel as they rise to meet the ongoing challenges of public safety.</p> <p>Above all, the Court Monitor’s assessment is recognition of the steadfast dedication of the men and women of the Seattle Police Department. Our officers commit themselves each day to doing all they can to make this city a better place and to meeting the many challenges they are tasked to resolve with</p>

	honor, integrity, and compassion. Our officers are the backbone of our department, and I am grateful to each and every one of them.
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HEADLINE	05/18 Day 84 of the Russia invasion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/18/russia-ukraine-war-what-we-know-on-day-84-of-the-invasion
GIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The international criminal court on Tuesday sent a 42-member team to Ukraine to probe alleged war crimes since the Russian invasion in what it called the largest such deployment in its history. • The US will create a new unit to research, document and publicise alleged war crimes by Russia in Ukraine. The Conflict Observatory will “capture, analyse, and make widely available evidence of Russia-perpetrated war crimes and other atrocities in Ukraine,” the US state department said. • Peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine have stagnated, officials said on Tuesday, with both sides trading blame and Moscow indicating a return to talks may be difficult. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said he believed no peace deal can be made if negotiators try to “transfer the dialogue” to focus on what the west had to say instead of the immediate situation in Ukraine. That ruled out chances for progress in talks, he added. “We always say that we are ready for negotiations ... but we were given no other choice,” Lavrov said. • The fate of more than 260 Ukrainian soldiers who have ended weeks of resistance at the Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol remains unclear, after the fighters surrendered and were transferred to Russian-controlled territory. Ukraine’s deputy defence minister said they would be swapped in a prisoner exchange, but some Russian officials said they could be tried or even executed. • Eight people have died and 12 were wounded after Russia launched a missile strike on the village of Desna in the northern Ukrainian region of Chernihiv, according to Ukraine’s state emergency service. The regional governor, Viacheslav Chaus, said Russia launched four missiles at around 5am local time on Tuesday. Two of the missiles hit buildings in the village, he said. • A village in Russia’s western province of Kursk bordering Ukraine came under Ukrainian fire, the regional governor said, but there were no injuries. • France’s president, Emmanuel Macron, promised his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, that French arms deliveries to Kyiv would intensify in the coming days, the Élysée said. Zelenskiy said he had a “long and meaningful” conversation with Macron where they discussed “the course of hostilities, the operation to rescue the military from Azovstal and the vision of the prospects of the negotiation process”. • The EU’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, said Russian forces may have suffered “impressive losses” since their invasion of Ukraine. He told reporters: “If it is true that Russia has lost 15% of their troops since the beginning of the war, this is a world record of the losses of an army invading a country.” Borrell also said all EU member states will support Finland and Sweden in joining Nato. • Finland and Sweden announced they will submit their bids to join Nato together, despite Turkey’s threat to block the military alliance’s expansion. Finland’s parliament overwhelmingly approved a government proposal to join Nato, a day after Sweden confirmed its intention to join the alliance. The Finnish president, Sauli Niinistö, said he was sure both countries would overcome Turkish opposition to their historic membership bids. • Niinistö and Sweden’s prime minister, Magdalena Andersson, will meet the US president, Joe Biden, on Thursday, the White House said. The leaders are expected to discuss Finland and Sweden’s Nato applications, European security and support for Ukraine amid Russia’s invasion, it said. • Lavrov, has said that Finland and Sweden joining Nato would probably make “not much difference”. The two Nordic countries “have been participating in Nato military exercises for many years,” Lavrov said. • The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has said that Europe risked paying the most expensive energy prices in the world by abandoning Russian energy supplies. Speaking at a

	<p>meeting with domestic oil managers and government officials, Putin said it was impossible for some European countries to quickly ditch Russian oil.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volodymyr Zelenskiy gave a surprise address to open the Cannes Film Festival in France. Over video, Zelensky said that “it’s necessary for cinema not to be silent” • Russian TV aired an interview with military analyst Mikhail Khodarenok, who said Russia’s situation “will clearly get worse”, in a rare diversion from the Kremlin’s official line. Russia has tried to hide the scale of its losses and setbacks in Ukraine, aggressively censoring and prosecuting any who question the Kremlin’s claims that all is going according to plan.
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HEADLINE	05/17 Fate unclear Ukraine troops Mariupol
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/17/fate-hundreds-ukrainian-soldiers-unclear-azovstal-resistance-ends
GIST	<p>The fate of hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers who have ended weeks of resistance at the Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol remains unclear, after the fighters surrendered and were transferred to Russian-controlled territory.</p> <p>Ukraine’s deputy defence minister said they would be swapped in a prisoner exchange, but some Russian officials said on Tuesday they could be tried and even executed. MPs in Russia’s State Duma said they would propose new laws that could derail prisoner exchanges of fighters who Moscow claims are “terrorists”.</p> <p>Russian investigators have said they plan to interrogate the soldiers and could charge them with “crimes committed by the Ukrainian regime against the civilian population in south-east Ukraine”.</p> <p>On Tuesday evening, seven buses carrying Ukrainian soldiers left the Azovstal plant in the port city and arrived at a former prison colony in the Russian-controlled town of Olenivka in Donetsk, Reuters reported. Russia called the Azovstal operation a mass surrender, while the Ukrainian army said the soldiers defending the steel plant had “performed their combat task” and that the main goal was now to save their lives.</p> <p>“Ukraine needs Ukrainian heroes alive,” said the president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, in a video address.</p> <p>For weeks, hundreds of troops have been holed up in a warren of tunnels and bunkers underneath the steelworks, as Russian forces took control of the rest of the city after turning much of it into an uninhabitable wasteland. Many of those stuck at Azovstal had serious injuries, with limited medical care and dwindling supplies.</p> <p>In the last few weeks, civilians who had also taken cover in the plant were rescued after a deal was brokered by the International Committee of the Red Cross to allow them to leave for Ukrainian-controlled territory.</p> <p>Ukraine had been pushing for a deal that would also allow the fighters to retreat to Ukrainian-controlled areas, or for their evacuation to a neutral country. However, with that not forthcoming, Ukrainian officials announced in the early hours of Tuesday that the defence of the plant was in effect over. “This was the only option,” said the deputy defence minister, Hanna Maliar.</p> <p>Russia’s defence ministry said 265 Ukrainian fighters surrendered at the plant, including 51 seriously injured soldiers who would be transferred to hospitals in Novoazovsk in Russian-controlled territory in east Ukraine. It was not immediately clear how many Ukrainian troops remained in the plant.</p> <p>Footage shared by pro-Russia social media accounts showed groups of soldiers carrying out the wounded on stretchers amid the devastation outside the plant.</p>

“An exchange procedure will take place for their return home,” said Maliar. Ukraine’s deputy prime minister Iryna Vereshchuk also said the fighters would be exchanged. “God willing, everything will be fine,” she wrote.

Zelenskiy sounded a more cautious note. “The work of bringing the boys home continues, and this work needs delicacy – and time,” he said.

Details of the agreement that led to the evacuation remain unclear, and a flurry of hardline statements from Russian officials suggested an exchange could still be some way off.

Vladimir Putin’s spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, promised that the fighters who surrendered would be treated “in accordance with international standards”, but this was immediately undermined by statements from two other Russian officials.

Leonid Slutsky, a Russian MP who took part in negotiations with Ukraine earlier in the war, suggested Russia should lift its moratorium on the death penalty for fighters from the Azov regiment, one of the main forces defending the steelworks, calling them “animals in human form”.

“Nazi criminals should not be exchanged,” said Vyacheslav Volodin, one of Russia’s most powerful officials and the chair of the State Duma, during a speech on Tuesday. “Our country treats those who surrendered or were captured humanely. But with regards to Nazis, our position should be unchanged: these are war criminals and we must do everything so that they stand trial.”

Volodin did not directly address the surrender of the troops at Azovstal in his statement, but the context was clear as Russia’s defence ministry released video of the evacuation of the Ukrainian fighters on Tuesday morning, saying some of them were members of the Azov battalion.

Russia’s justice ministry appealed to the supreme court to declare the Azov regiment a terrorist organisation on Tuesday, possibly introducing another hurdle to a potential exchange.

On Tuesday evening Russia’s investigative committee said it would interrogate the captured fighters and could seek to charge them with crimes against civilians in the Donbas region of east Ukraine.

“Russian investigators will identify the nationalists, check them for involvement in crimes committed against the civilian population, and the information obtained during the interrogations will be compared with other data available,” the committee said in a statement.

Azov has been a key part of the Russian propaganda narrative about the war in Ukraine, which was originally launched with the supposed goal of “denazification”. It was formed in 2014 as a volunteer militia to fight Russia-backed forces in east Ukraine and many of its original members had far-right extremist views. Since then, the unit has been integrated into the Ukrainian national guard and its commanders say it has moved away from its far-right origins.

The defence of Mariupol has come to symbolise heroism in the face of the Russian attack for many millions of Ukrainians. As well as the boost to morale, Ukrainian military sources have claimed that by putting up such a fierce fight for Mariupol, the Russian army’s advance was stalled.

On Twitter, the Zelenskiy adviser Mykhailo Podolyak compared the Azovstal defenders to the small force of Spartans who held out against a much larger attacking force in the battle of Thermopylae in the fifth century BC. The defence of Mariupol “completely changed the course of the war” and “ruined Russia’s plans to capture the east of Ukraine”, he wrote.

Sandra Krotevych, the sister of Azov’s chief of staff, Bohdan Krotevych, said she had been in contact with her brother at 5am on Tuesday and he was still on the territory of Azovstal, but since then she had not heard from him. In recent weeks, she said, as the supplies hoarded in the steelworks began to dwindle and

	<p>Russian strikes on the plant continued, the soldiers had been eating only once a day and had been drinking water from pipes and other unclean sources.</p> <p>Sandra Krotevych said the fighters had long realised Mariupol no longer had strategic importance for the Ukrainian army and were hoping to be able to bury their dead and evacuate their injured, but they had been holding out for a deal that would have allowed them to leave to Ukraine-controlled territory or a third country.</p> <p>“To put it mildly, I’m a bit surprised. I am not happy about it and I would have liked to hear security guarantees before this happened,” she said in a telephone interview.</p> <p>Now the fighters are at the mercy of Russian authorities, with hardline commentators demanding they are not exchanged. On the state-funded RT, the commentator Anton Krasovsky called the evacuees “wounded terrorists” and demanded they should not be handed over to Ukraine.</p> <p>“Any Azov member given to Kyiv will be treated as our defeat, as our Russian capitulation,” said Krasovsky. He called on his viewers “not to allow this”, saying there should be a trial and “RT can hold a livestream for their wives”.</p> <p>Amid such rhetoric from Russia, Krotevych called on the international community to find a way to ensure the soldiers were returned to Ukraine. “Their lives are in the hands of international leaders. If they can find a way to save them, then all the citizens of Ukraine will be extremely grateful. They are heroes for the whole of Ukraine,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Mariupol battle gripped the world
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/17/defenders-of-mariupol-are-the-heroes-of-our-time-the-battle-that-gripped-the-world
GIST	<p>Cut off from the world and low on food and ammunition, many of the hundreds of defenders of the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol were wounded, some missing limbs. Their capitulation had been inevitable for weeks.</p> <p>That moment came late on Monday as more than 260 – bearded, filthy, emaciated, and including 51 severely injured – laid down their arms and were evacuated amid a wider concession of defeat after 82 days of fighting in the besieged port city.</p> <p>“The ‘Mariupol’ garrison has fulfilled its combat mission,” the general staff of Ukraine’s armed forces said in a statement. “The supreme military command ordered the commanders of the units stationed at Azovstal to save the lives of the personnel ... Defenders of Mariupol are the heroes of our time,” it added.</p> <p>And while several hundred fighters remained inside the plant, their commanders admitted their mission had “concluded” while officials continued with negotiations to “evacuate them”.</p> <p>Late on Monday, five buses carrying troops from Azovstal were seen arriving in nearby Russian-controlled Novoazovsk. In one, marked with a Z like many Russian military vehicles in Ukraine, men were stacked on stretchers on three levels.</p> <p>In a long-denied victory for the Kremlin, a battle that has gripped the world’s attention appeared finally over, leaving a city in ruins and perhaps thousands of civilians dead.</p> <p>With its urban areas sprawling along the coastline of the Sea of Azov in the shape of a comma, the siege of Mariupol came to define one of the most brutal episodes in Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.</p>

It was one of the first major cities to be encircled and viewed as one of the Kremlin's key objectives both for its economic importance and as a stepping stone in building a land bridge from Russia to Russian-occupied Crimea.

The capture of Mariupol loomed large in the Kremlin's imagination for propaganda purposes too: as the home base of the Azov brigade, which at its 2014 inception, when the war in Donbas began, included far-right volunteers, some with neo-Nazi affiliations. (In recent years the brigade has been fully integrated into the Ukrainian military).

It was the sheer levels of violence inflicted on the city and on its civilian population day after day, however, that has kept Mariupol in the headlines.

The few who have been able to enter the city, including the International Committee for the Red Cross, have described conditions in the city as "apocalyptic".

Those civilians who have managed to escape in the weeks of the encirclement have often had to run a gauntlet of Russian shell fire, even when humanitarian corridors were supposed to have been negotiated.

Health facilities, including the city's maternity hospitals, have been hit in lethal attacks. In March, in one of the most grisly incidents, the Donetsk regional drama theatre in the city, where large numbers of civilians were sheltering was bombed, killing hundreds.

Mariupol's war, like many other areas in Ukraine, began in the bitter winter chill of the early hours of 24 February as Russian shells began landing in the city.

What marked Mariupol out as different, however, was its proximity to Russian-allied forces in the breakaway Donetsk region and the fact that, unlike many others places, it was largely shut off from reporters. Instead, Mariupol's story has been largely dramatised by its mayor, Vadym Boichenko.

In the earliest weeks of the war Mariupol was not yet entirely cut off from the rest of the country. Reinforcements from cities as distant as Lviv were able to bolster the frontlines. But as the war ground on, even those few entry points were being shut off.

With attacking Russian forces – backed by fighters of the notorious Chechen warlord, Ramzan Kadyrov – demanding the city surrender, on 4 March, Boichenko warned gravely of the dangers facing trapped civilians.

"We are simply being destroyed," he said in a shaky video appeal, describing indiscriminate shelling of residential areas and hospitals. "They want to wipe Mariupol and Mariupol residents off the face of the earth."

A day later Boichenko's warning was underlined by the Red Cross even as it tried to negotiate a humanitarian corridor for residents to flee, adding that many people were stranded in shelters without food, water or electricity.

And the situation was worsening. By 12 March, Russian forces had captured the eastern suburbs of the city, tightening their grip. On 16 March, the theatre was bombed as hundreds of civilians sheltered inside. "I do not want to believe in this horror," the Mariupol municipality said in a statement on Telegram.

An investigation by Associated Press published earlier this month suggested about 600 people may have died in that attack alone.

The violence aimed at the port city has been a reflection on how long it has held out, with its defenders dug into well protected positions, including within the labyrinth of the sprawling Azovstal steelworks, covering an area of about 4 sq miles, including underground tunnels.

Inverting history, the steelworks has become to Mariupol what the factory district was for Stalingrad's Russian defenders, even as the Kremlin claimed prematurely, on several occasions, to have taken it.

But unlike Stalingrad, which could be resupplied across the Volga river, the Ukrainian defenders of Mariupol have been cut off from resupply by the surrounding Russian forces and also by their naval blockade of the Black and Azov seas.

As the Russians advanced ever further into the city, the defending forces issued statements reflecting their perilous position – as they ran out of ammunition, unable to care for their hundreds of wounded, forcing units to surrender.

Last week more than 1,000 soldiers of Ukraine's 36th marine brigade, including scores of officers and several Britons fighting in the city, surrendered.

Other members of the same unit, who held on inside the Azovstal steel plant along with members of the Azov brigade and more than 1,000 civilians, were clear they could not hold out much longer, outnumbered 10 to one and with no hope of relief.

A Ukrainian commander in Mariupol sent a message saying "they will soon kill us" as he sheltered from Russia's bombardment of the steelworks where his troops were making a last stand.

Among them was Serhiy Volynskyi, of the 36th marine brigade, who sent a message from inside the plant as Moscow stepped up its assault calling on the last defenders to give up or die.

In a video message that was widely posted, Volynski had appealed for help from the world to allow them to leave.

"We are only defending one objective: the Azovstal plant where, in addition to military personnel, there are also civilians who have fallen victim to this war," he said, adding he believed those in the plant had, at best days at worst hours, to live.

"They have advantage in the air, in artillery, in their forces on land, in equipment and in tanks."

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, then ordered his forces not to storm the last remaining Ukrainian stronghold but instead to block it "so that not even a fly comes through".

Before the order to surrender, that encirclement was total. Civilians who were finally [evacuated from the steel plant in May spoke of the awful conditions](#), with so little food and water that adults were eating one tiny meal a day.

"No one came out of there unchanged," said Oksana, an Azovstal employee who asked not to give her full name after her escape. "They were one person when they went in, and another person when they came out."

And there are questions still unresolved, not least how many Ukrainian civilians died inside Mariupol, an issue unlikely to be resolved while it is under full Russian control. Ukrainian officials have suggested that the death toll could well exceed 20,000.

The UN high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, has also warned of high casualties. "We estimate the civilian death toll in Mariupol to lie in the thousands, while only with time will the true scale of atrocities, casualties and damage become clear."

Boichenko has suggested that Russia has been hiding evidence of the civilian deaths by shelling a mass grave. "The invaders are concealing evidence of their crimes," the mayor said. "The cemetery is located near a petrol station to the left side of a circular road. The Russians have dug huge trenches, 30 metres wide. They chuck people in."

The other issue will be the fate of the surrendered Ukrainian defenders who Kyiv now hopes to exchange for Russian prisoners of war.

“We hope that we will be able to save the lives of our guys,” Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, said in an early morning address. “There are severely wounded ones among them. They’re receiving care. Ukraine needs Ukrainian heroes alive.”

For those inside the Azovstal plant the concession of defeat was coloured with fatalism.

The commander of the Azov regiment inside the steelworks, Denys Prokopenko, said in a prerecorded video message released on Monday that the regiment’s mission was finally over, with as many lives saved as possible.

“Absolutely safe plans and operations don’t exist during war,” he concluded grimly.

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HEADLINE	05/18 UK inflation hits 40yr-high of 9%
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/may/18/uk-inflation-soars-to-highest-level-in-more-than-40-years
GIST	<p>UK inflation soared to 9% in April – its highest level for more than 40 years – as the rising cost of gas and electricity pushed household energy bills to record levels.</p> <p>The escalating cost of food and transport also contributed to the rising cost of living, deepening the crisis affecting millions of low- and middle-income families.</p> <p>Business groups said all sectors of industry and commerce were suffering from the steep rise in energy and fuel costs, with many facing a similar shock to their finances as seen during the pandemic but without the same level of government support.</p> <p>The Office for National Statistics said the 54% increase in the energy price cap in April, which took the average annual gas and electricity bill close to £2,000, was the main reason for the jump in the consumer prices index from 7% in March.</p> <p>Average petrol prices rose to a record 161.8p a litre in April 2022 from 125.5p a year earlier. Diesel was another factor behind the increase in the consumer prices index from 7% in February after the average cost at the pumps hit a record high of 176.1p a litre, leading to an average increase over the last 12 months in motor fuels of 31.4%.</p> <p>The end of a temporary VAT cut for the hospitality industry also pushed up prices after restaurants and hotels said they were unable to cushion customers from the increase in the tax from 12.5% to 20%.</p> <p>A steep fall in the value of the pound on foreign exchange markets piled further pressure on businesses by adding to the cost of imports. Sterling has slumped since last month, from more than \$1.30 to \$1.24 after hitting \$1.22 last week.</p> <p>Food banks have reported an increase in demand for food packages after the rise in energy bills, while many small business owners have said a combination of higher costs and tax increases have pushed them to the edge of bankruptcy.</p> <p>Figures from the Resolution Foundation showed the poorest tenth of households faced an inflation rate of 10.2% in April, significantly higher than the 8.7% affecting the top 10% of earners. The Institute for Fiscal Studies thinktank suggested the inflation rate experienced by the poorest households could be closer to 11%.</p>

Predictions that high inflation and a shortage of skilled workers have already begun to push the UK economy into recession are expected to add further pressure on the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, to offer further support to households and businesses.

Bank of England policymakers are expected to react to the figures at their meeting in June by increasing interest rates for the fourth time since last December to 1.25%.

However, opinions are divided over how much further the central bank will go to drive up borrowing costs should the economy contract in the summer and autumn. James Smith, an economist at ING, said it was likely the bank would raise rates twice before pausing.

Labour said it was “unconscionable” that Sunak was refusing to tax the fossil fuel industry to fund extra measures for poorer households. Conservative MPs voted on Tuesday night against a Labour motion for a windfall tax on North Sea oil and gas firms that could generate about £3bn.

The opposition will table another amendment in parliament on Wednesday to put pressure on Boris Johnson to commit to an emergency budget addressing the cost of living crisis.

The British Chambers of Commerce has also called for the chancellor to hold an emergency mini-budget. Suren Thiru, the head of economics at the BCC, said: “The scale at which inflation is damaging key drivers of UK output, including consumer spending and business investment, is unprecedented and means there is a real chance the UK will be in recession by the third quarter of the year.”

Sunak has indicated he may offer further measures to boost the incomes of those on the lowest pay, although it is understood the cabinet is split over how to fund the billions of pounds that campaigners say are needed in extra subsidies or welfare payments, with some favouring a windfall tax on oil and gas companies.

Labour market figures released on Tuesday showed that average total wages increased by 7% in March, pushed up by bonus payments to staff and consultants working in the finance, IT, construction and professional services sectors.

However, income growth has not been evenly distributed. The average pay rise without bonuses was only 4.2%, hitting millions of workers with a fifth consecutive month of falling real wages.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Copper River salmon back at inflated price
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3476411/copper-river-salmon-back-inflated-price/
GIST	<p>The first shipment of Alaska’s Copper River salmon arrived at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport Tuesday morning, marking the start of the season for the popular fish.</p> <p>Tuesday’s shipment was the first of many this year. Three to four of these flights will touch down daily through the season, according to Adam Drouhard, Alaska Airlines’ Managing Director of Cargo.</p> <p>More than 17,000 pounds of Copper River salmon were flown into Seattle for the annual spring tradition.</p> <p>Copper River salmon season usually runs mid-May through June.</p> <p>Prices for the fish are up 10% since last year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Copper River salmon now costs \$34.99 a pound with the Seattle Fish Company, according to KIRO 7. Getting it delivered to your home would cost an extra \$65.</p> <p>Customers are shelling out record amounts for the fish in pre-orders. A whole sockeye totals around \$200, while other customers are paying nearly \$75 per pound for sockeye fillets.</p>

Customers are willing to pay even more of a premium for Copper River king salmon at around \$90 per pound for a whole fish that is 10 pounds as part of a pre-order totaling just under \$900. They're also paying around \$130 per pound for a king fillet.

At Pike Place Fish Market, a 10-pound whole Copper River king salmon costs about \$900.

According to the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, this year's commercial Copper River salmon harvests are projected to reach 716,000 fish.

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HEADLINE	05/18 Gas over \$4/gal. in every state for first time
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/05/18/gas-prices-record-four-dollars/
GIST	<p>Not too long ago in some parts of the United States, paying more than \$4 for a gallon of gas was seen as a coastal problem faced by Americans in pricey big cities. But now, for the first time, the average price for a gallon of gas has surpassed \$4 in all 50 states.</p> <p>While the national average price has been hovering at or above \$4 for weeks, Georgia, Kansas and Oklahoma had yet to cross the mark, according to data tracked by AAA.</p> <p>But they joined the rest of the United States this week, with a gallon of gas in Oklahoma costing about \$4.01 on average Tuesday, according to the AAA figures. That's far below the average for a gallon of gas in California, which was \$6.02. In Georgia, it was \$4.06, and in Kansas, it was just over \$4.</p> <p>Nationally, the average cost for a gallon of gas was \$4.52 on Tuesday. In addition to California, Washington state, Oregon, Nevada, Alaska and Hawaii all had prices averaging more than \$5 on Tuesday.</p> <p>Severin Borenstein, an economics professor at the University of California at Berkeley whose research focuses on energy pricing, said that while the prices are "coming as a real shock" for Americans, he was not surprised by the milestone, adding that "with high crude oil prices, constrained refineries, and strong demand as the economy comes back, it's no surprise that we have hit these levels."</p> <p>Borenstein noted that rising gas prices are a "substantial hardship" for low-income drivers particularly, adding to a list of economic challenges, including medical costs and rising rents.</p> <p>Last week, the national average price of gas hit a record amid highflying inflation and turbulence in gas and oil markets, in part because of the war in Ukraine.</p> <p>Prices are even higher at pumps along the highway, according to data from the federal Energy Information Administration: In every region in the United States, it costs more than \$5 per gallon to fill up near a highway. (The national highway gas price average is \$5.61, up \$2.36 from a year ago.)</p> <p>Still, when adjusted for inflation, prices were actually higher in the summer of 2008, said Erich Muehlegger, an economics professor at the University of California at Davis, whose research focuses on energy and consumer behavior. He added that summer — "driving season" — tends to bring increased demand for gas and oil, pushing prices up.</p> <p>President Biden has sought to address the issue, saying in recent days that inflation is among his top priorities — though he's juggling a variety of crises, including a baby formula shortage, the aftermath of the country's latest racist mass shooting, and Russia's war on Ukraine.</p> <p>Borenstein said that while oil prices are hard to predict, oil futures markets indicate that the next year could see lower prices. In the meantime, he said, policymakers "should try to explain what is going on rather than create convenient scapegoats or push their own energy agendas."</p> <p>Muehlegger added that policymakers have few options available to lower prices in the short term, though some have tried; he noted that gas taxes have been cut in some states and that House Democrats are</p>

	pushing legislation to prohibit price gouging. But oil prices are largely driven by global supply and demand, limiting the effect of such efforts.
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HEADLINE	05/17 How big Covid wave? No one really knows
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/05/17/latest-coronavirus-wave-us/
GIST	<p>Eileen Wassermann struggles to calculate her daily risks at this stage of the coronavirus pandemic — with infections drastically undercounted and mask mandates gone.</p> <p>The immunocompromised 69-year-old ensconces herself in her SUV for the half-hour ferry ride across the Puget Sound from her home on Bainbridge Island to Seattle, where she undergoes treatment for the rare inflammatory condition sarcoidosis.</p> <p>A retired scientist and lawyer who worked with drug companies, Wassermann is comfortable analyzing coronavirus data. But she said current numbers, which don't account for most at-home test results, are unreliable.</p> <p>"My mode, which sounds ridiculous maybe at this point, is to be as cautious as I was at the beginning of 2020," said Wassermann, who has received two booster doses of the coronavirus vaccine. "I don't want to always walk around like a scaredy cat, but then on the other hand with this immune condition I have, I don't want to take any chances."</p> <p>Americans like Wassermann are navigating murky waters in the latest wave of the pandemic, with highly transmissible subvariants of omicron spreading as governments drop measures to contain the virus and reveal less data about infections. With public health authorities shifting their focus to covid-related hospitalizations as the pandemic's U.S. death toll hits 1 million, people are largely on their own to gauge risk amid what could be a stealth surge.</p> <p>Experts say Americans can assume infections in their communities are five to ten times higher than official counts.</p> <p>"Any sort of look at the metrics on either a local, state or national level is a severe undercount," said Jessica Malaty Rivera, an epidemiologist at the Pandemic Prevention Institute housed at The Rockefeller Foundation. "Everyone knows someone getting covid now."</p> <p>Hospitalizations nationally have increased 50 percent since bottoming out six weeks ago. But the roughly 23,000 patients with covid in hospitals over the last week still represent near the lowest hospitalization levels of the entire pandemic. The recent increase is driven by the Northeast, where hospitalization rates are almost twice as high as any other region.</p> <p>Reported cases of covid have also tripled in the Northeast in just over a month, driving much of the growth nationally, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The country has averaged nearly 90,000 new cases each day over the past week — three times higher than the lowest point in March.</p> <p>The latest uptick in infections is testing a new CDC alert system adopted by many local and state governments that categorizes covid-19 community levels as "low" even with the number of new cases rising to a level once considered high.</p> <p>More than two-thirds of Americans live in low-risk areas under these metrics. But 43 percent of residents in the Northeast live in areas considered high risk, compared to 9 percent of the Midwest and less than 1 percent each in the South and West.</p> <p>"If there's one word to sum up where we are, it's 'unpredictable'," said Jeffrey S. Duchin, the top public health official in Seattle and King County, where cases have climbed significantly in recent weeks after falling off following the omicron wave.</p>

“Things are clearly better than they were in the past,” Duchin said. “Vaccines are doing a great job at keeping people out of the hospital, but the virus is becoming more transmissible.”

Experts say the rise in infections is not surprising, especially after governors scrapped indoor mask mandates and a judge voided the federal mask requirement for public transportation. Spring is also a season for gatherings from Easter brunch to proms and graduations.

“It’s the next phase of the return to normal: Every time we take that next big step, there’s always a rebound,” said David Rubin, who tracks national coronavirus trends for the PolicyLab at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. “If you are at risk, you should exercise caution and certainly consider masking in public places.”

Public health authorities are not as worried about rising cases because the infected are increasingly vaccinated and boosted and have access to therapeutics such as the antiviral Paxlovid that help prevent people from becoming seriously ill.

But doctors say the new CDC public reporting categories obscure the true risk of contracting covid-19, which still disrupts lives, can lead to long-term complications, and poses heightened danger for the elderly and immunocompromised.

“It allows people to move around and to have a false sense of security,” said Jayne Morgan, executive director of the covid task force at Piedmont Healthcare in Georgia.

“It’s concerning in a public health crisis we have moved away from practicing prevention,” Morgan added. “The best medical physicians always practice preventive health care. It’s why you get mammograms. It’s why you get colonoscopies. You don’t wait for the cancer to develop.”

The District of Columbia is among the communities where tensions are brewing as residents question the official designation of low community risk.

Local health officials stopped publicizing daily cases on their website after the omicron wave, telling residents to treat coronavirus more like an endemic illness and less like an emergency. In recent weeks, the city also stopped reporting results from wastewater virus monitoring and providing daily data to the CDC, leaving people with little information as infections rise.

Residents once accustomed to checking numbers on community spread before cementing social plans are uncertain how much weight to give to anecdotal reports of day care outbreaks, friends and colleagues getting sick, and infections from the recent White House Correspondents’ Association dinner.

“I’m just sort of grasping in the dark about what the cases are like in my community,” said Isabela Karibjanian, a 24-year-old policy researcher who wants to enjoy her final months in D.C. before moving to Europe for graduate school this summer.

She found herself erring on the side of caution in recent weeks by gathering outside with friends to avoid getting infected before attending a bridal shower and hosting an out-of-town visitor.

“You can never fully know the entire picture, but having those numbers gave me a reassurance I wasn’t about to enter a massive wave,” she said.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation estimates only about 13 percent of cases are being detected. But the organization’s director Christopher Murray says the United States is still in good shape and not on track to experience a surge of omicron subvariants seen in the United Kingdom.

“We have very, very low ICU admissions. We have really low deaths. And we probably have very high levels of immunity because omicron has infected so many people, vaccination is moderately high and a

number of people are being boosted,” Murray said. “We are in a good state and we will stay in that way until the fall and winter when immunity has waned a lot or until some nasty new variant shows up.”

John Brownstein, chief innovation officer at Boston Children’s Hospital, said New England is experiencing a hidden covid wave based on survey data suggesting five positive at-home coronavirus tests for every two lab tests. But that has not led to a worrying spike in hospitalizations.

New York state has recorded one of the nation’s highest covid-19 hospitalization levels at 14 of every 100,000 residents as of Monday, according to The Washington Post tracker. But hospitals say this is skewed by patients admitted for other reasons, then testing positive for the coronavirus.

Mangala Narasimhan, chief of critical care services at Northwell Health, New York’s largest health network, said patients with covid are not coming in with pneumonia and struggling to breathe as they had been the last two years.

“A lot of people I know in the community have covid,” she said. “None of that is being reflected here in the hospitals.”

Delaware and Maine are seeing the nation’s highest per capita hospitalization rate at 18 per 100,000 residents. But hospital associations in both states say their situations are manageable. In Delaware, the 111 patients hospitalized as of last Thursday is far below the 759 peak in January that prompted hospitals to declare a crisis that allowed them to ration care.

Watching reports of rising cases in the Northeast, Josh Elliott is uneasy about returning to once regular pleasures such as attending concerts and dining indoors in his Atlanta suburb.

Elliott is extra cautious because asthma and lung damage from pneumonia places him at a higher risk for severe covid-19 disease. He worries about a hidden surge since Georgia now reports cases weekly instead of daily.

With reliable data, Elliott said he would feel more comfortable attending a friend’s upcoming wedding and celebrating his upcoming 30th birthday at a restaurant with his girlfriend — instead of eating takeout.

“I want to have a nice birthday meal and not bring it home and get covid for my birthday,” he said.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Apple delays, modifies return to office plans
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/17/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases?name=styln-coronavirus&region=hub&block=storyline live updates block recirc&action=click&pgtype=LegacyCollection#apple-delays-return-to-office
GIST	<p>Apple, in a blow to its efforts to restore normalcy to its operations, has suspended its requirement that employees return to the office this month for at least three days a week because of a resurgence of Covid-19 cases.</p> <p>The reversal was welcome news for thousands of employees who pushed back against the company’s demand that they begin coming to the office three days a week in late May. Early this month, the group, which calls itself “Apple Together,” published a letter calling on the executive team to allow for a hybrid and flexible work schedule, saying they could collaborate remotely using online tools such as Slack and spare themselves hours of commuting.</p> <p>One of Apple’s leading artificial intelligence engineers, Ian Goodfellow, resigned in early May because of the office return policy. Mr. Goodfellow didn’t respond immediately to requests for comment.</p>

	<p>Apple said in a note to employees on Tuesday that it would proceed with a pilot program to bring some workers back to the office twice a week in the weeks ahead. It said anyone in that program who felt “uncomfortable coming into the office” would have the “option to work remotely.”</p> <p>The company also asked that employees who do come to campus wear masks in common areas and elevators. It said it would continue to monitor Covid cases and provide employees with updates at least two weeks before any future changes to its office policy.</p> <p>The pandemic hit less than a year after Apple celebrated the opening of its new, \$5 billion headquarters in Cupertino, Calif., a splashy circular building that resembles a spaceship. It has largely sat unused for the past two years.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 NYC virus cases reach ‘high’ alert level
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/17/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases?name=style-coronavirus&region=hub&block=storyline_live_updates_block_recirc&action=click&pgtype=LegacyCollection#nyc-covid-high-alert
GIST	<p>New York City health officials put the city on “high Covid alert” on Tuesday, after rising case counts and hospitalizations reached a level that could put substantial pressure on the health care system.</p> <p>The announcement was triggered by a color-coded alert system that the city introduced in March. But so far, the system has had little impact on the city’s disease control strategy or the public’s perception.</p> <p>Mayor Eric Adams warned Monday that the city was nearing the threshold, but said “we’re not at the point of mandating masks.”</p> <p>For two months now there has been a persistent rise in known infections, driven almost entirely by Omicron subvariants. In recent days, the city logged on average more than 3,500 new daily cases, although those numbers significantly understate the virus’s prevalence, as many infections are detected by at-home tests but never counted by the health authorities.</p> <p>Covid-19 hospitalizations have been ticking upward, recently reaching about 130 new admissions a day across New York City, according to state data.</p> <p>This latest wave of coronavirus cases — New York City’s fifth — began in mid-March and has taken less of a toll so far than when Omicron first swept through the city in December and January. In that initial Omicron wave, perhaps 30 percent of the city was infected, according to research by the C.D.C., and hospitals came under strain as sick patients packed emergency rooms.</p> <p>The city’s color-coded alert system incorporates data on both case counts and hospitalizations. And it ties specific recommendations to each threshold. On Tuesday, the city entered the orange, or “high” risk level, which comes with the recommendation that city government requires face masks in all public indoor settings.</p> <p>But Mr. Adams has shown little interest in requiring masks. At the “high” level, the mayor may consider reinstating a mask mandate, including in schools, but on Monday he said he was not planning to take that step yet.</p> <p>On Tuesday, his health commissioner, Dr. Ashwin Vasan, put out a statement urging that New Yorkers take their own precautions. But he made no mention of taking government action to impose mask mandates.</p> <p>“New York City has transitioned to a high Covid alert level, meaning now is the time to double down on protecting ourselves and each other by making choices that can keep our friends, neighbors, relatives and co-workers from getting sick,” he said in a statement.</p>

	<p>On Monday, Dr. Vasani issued an advisory recommending that people wear medical-grade masks in offices, grocery stores and other public indoor settings.</p> <p>Still, some New Yorkers were struck by how long it has taken the city to raise the alert level to high, given that the virus has been circulating widely over the past two months, with test positivity rates in some neighborhoods well over 10 percent.</p> <p>“The thresholds are meaningless,” said Professor Denis Nash, an epidemiologist at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health & Health Policy, in a phone interview Tuesday morning, as he recovered from Covid-19.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Public schools take hit: enrollment plunges
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/17/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases?name=styl-coronavirus&region=hub&block=storyline_live_updates_block_recirc&action=click&pgtype=LegacyCollection#public-schools-falling-enrollment
GIST	<p>ORANGE COUNTY, Calif. — In New York City, the nation’s largest school district has lost some 50,000 students over the past two years. In Michigan, enrollment remains more than 50,000 below prepandemic levels from big cities to the rural Upper Peninsula.</p> <p>In the suburbs of Orange County, Calif., where families have moved for generations to be part of the public school system, enrollment slid for the second consecutive year; statewide, more than a quarter-million public school students have dropped from California’s rolls since 2019.</p> <p>And since school funding is tied to enrollment, cities that have lost many students — including Denver, Albuquerque and Oakland — are now considering combining classrooms, laying off teachers or shutting down entire schools.</p> <p>All together, America’s public schools have lost at least 1.2 million students since 2020, according to a recently published national survey. State enrollment figures show no sign of a rebound to the previous national levels any time soon.</p> <p>A broad decline was already underway in the nation’s public school system as rates of birth and immigration have fallen, particularly in cities. But the coronavirus crisis supercharged that drop in ways that experts say will not easily be reversed.</p> <p>No overriding explanation has emerged yet for the widespread drop-off. But experts point to two potential causes: Some parents became so fed up with remote instruction or mask mandates that they started home-schooling their children or sending them to private or parochial schools that largely remained open during the pandemic. And other families were thrown into such turmoil by pandemic-related job losses, homelessness and school closures that their children simply dropped out.</p> <p>Now educators and school officials are confronting a potentially harsh future of lasting setbacks in learning, hardened inequities in education and smaller budgets accompanying smaller student populations.</p> <p>“This has been a seismic hit to public education,” said Marguerite Roza, director of the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University. “Student outcomes are low. Habits have been broken. School finances are really shaken. We shouldn’t think that this is going to be like a rubber band that bounces back to where it was before.”</p> <p>There are roughly 50 million students in the United States public school system.</p>

In large urban districts, the drop-off has been particularly acute. The [Los Angeles Unified School District](#)'s noncharter schools lost some 43,000 students over the past two school years. Enrollment [in the Chicago schools](#) has dropped by about 25,000 in that time frame.

But suburban and rural schools have not been immune.

[In the suburbs of Kansas City](#), the school district of Olathe, Kan., lost more than 1,000 of its 33,000 or so students in 2020, as families relocated and shifted to private schools or home-schooling; only about half of them came back this school year.

In rural Woodbury County, Iowa, south of Sioux City, enrollment in the [Westwood Community School District](#) fell by more than 5 percent during the last two years, to 522 students from 552, in spite of a small influx from cities during the pandemic, the superintendent, Jay Lutt, said. Now, in addition to demographic trends that have long eroded the size of rural Iowa's school populations, diminishing funding, the district is grappling with inflation as the price of fuel for school buses has soared, Mr. Lutt said.

In some states where schools eschewed remote instruction — Florida, for instance — enrollment has not only rebounded, but remains robust. [An analysis](#) by the American Enterprise Institute, a right-leaning think tank, concluded last month that remote instruction was a major driver around the country, with enrollment falling most in districts most likely to have delayed their return to in-person classrooms.

Private schools have also seen some gains in enrollment. Federal head counts have not yet been released, but both the National Association of Independent Schools and the National Catholic Educational Association have reported increases that total about 73,000 K-12 students during the past two years.

At the same time, some families are leaving their local public schools not because they are abandoning the system altogether but because they have moved to other parts of the country that are more affordable.

Enrollment has surged as well in [rural resort areas](#), driven by the relocation of tech workers and others able to work remotely, particularly after the pandemic set in.

School funding is tied directly to enrollment numbers in most states, and while federal pandemic aid has buffered school budgets so far, the Biden administration has made it clear that the relief is finite. Some districts are already bracing for budget shortfalls.

“When you lose kids, you lose money,” Ms. Roza said. “There’s no hidden piece to this puzzle. You have to close schools and lay off people. And every day you spend trying to avoid that, your kids are getting older and still not reading, and your district is spending money it’s not going to have.”

Few states illustrate the challenge as clearly as California, which educates roughly one in eight of the nation's public schoolchildren. For the first time in two decades, [public school enrollment fell below six million](#) this academic year.

The defections spanned the economic spectrum. In affluent Laguna Beach, Dr. Ann Vu became so fed up with the public school district's plan for reopening classrooms that, this year, she moved two of her four children to private schools.

“The kids just weren’t doing anything at all,” said Dr. Vu, a dermatologist who said her children were gone for good from the public system. At the Catholic high school where her daughter landed, the once-modest wait list is 200 names long.

Up the freeway in Anaheim Hills, Jaime Parish's three children also were gone from their former class as the year started. Rendered homeless in late 2020, they had struggled for months to keep up academically, shuffling for almost a year between motels, relatives and Ms. Parish's 1997 Honda before they quietly stopped attending school entirely.

First their Wi-Fi was spotty. Then Ms. Parish's mother got Covid-19. Then the car broke and a plan to move to Bakersfield fizzled. By February, a local nonprofit that helped them find housing could find no record of school enrollment for her sons, 17 and 6, or her daughter, 15.

"We tried," said Ms. Parish, 38, who was camped under a bridge near Disneyland at one point. "But it just got too hard."

Education officials say it is too soon to know how many students fell through the cracks of the public school system. Before the pandemic, [enrollment had been declining overall in California](#), a function of high housing costs, lower birthrates and restricted immigration. But this year's decline was tens of thousands of students larger than could be explained by demographic trends, relocations or defections to home-schooling or private schools.

The virus sapped many districts of the personnel to reliably track students who were truant or absent, and the state enrollment census was taken early in the year, during a surge in infections that may have distorted the numbers.

Social service agencies throughout the state, however, say they have seen increasing demand from families whose children arrive for services unsure of their enrollment status.

"We're seeing a huge influx of people who've lost housing," said Cyndee Albertson, executive director of Family Promise of Orange County, which helped place Ms. Parish and her children in an extended-stay hotel room and enrolled them in nearby schools.

"The parents are afraid if they seek services the protective services will take away their children and the children don't want to go to school when they can't wash their clothes or shower," Ms. Albertson said. "These situations are nothing new, but since the pandemic, they've gotten a lot more frequent and a lot worse."

State education officials have appointed a task force to investigate the decline and to try to determine the whereabouts of unaccounted-for students and their reasons for leaving the public school system. The drop defies a significant infusion of money and manpower to keep students in classrooms, including mass coronavirus testing and outreach for chronically absent students.

Policymakers are straining to avoid further losses. Some districts have [resisted reinstating face masks](#), even amid a resurgence of Covid-19, because of the suspicion that mandates are turning off families. California lawmakers recently [postponed the addition of Covid-19 inoculations](#) to the list of required school vaccinations in part because some school superintendents worried about the potential hit on enrollment.

At the Capistrano Unified School District in the suburbs of Orange County, where home buyers have long paid a premium for the public school system, more than 3,000 parents said in a survey last month that they would withdraw their children next school year if Covid-19 vaccines become mandatory for school attendance without at least a "personal belief" exemption.

"We love our school," Lisa Rogers, 38, a district mother of two, said. "But if my children are forced to wear masks again, or if I'm forced to vaccinate them against my will, I'm going to pull them out and home-school."

A district spokesman said Capistrano Unified had already lost more than 2,800 students since the pandemic started; the withdrawals suggested by the polls would remove about one student in 15 from

	<p>classrooms and about \$38 million from the district's roughly \$500 million budget next year, if they were to happen.</p> <p>In some California cities, the situation is already urgent. Oakland's school system is contemplating the shutdown or merger of nearly a dozen schools over the next two years, an exercise that has unleashed protests, vandalism, a one-day teacher strike and a recent school board resignation. In Southern California, where home prices have been soaring, parents have been fighting the closure of a longstanding neighborhood school in Inglewood.</p> <p>"It was little by little," said Mahtab Thorson, an Orange County mother of three, estimating that her middle son has lost some 30 classmates since he entered kindergarten in 2020. "A kid would drop off, a kid would drop off, another kid would drop off. I'd mention a name and he'd say, 'Oh, they're not there anymore.'"</p>
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HEADLINE	05/18 'Historic' Finland, Sweden apply to NATO
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/may/18/nato-chief-jens-stoltenberg-hails-historic-moment/
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS (AP) — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Wednesday that the military alliance stands ready to seize a historic moment and move quickly on allowing Finland and Sweden to join its ranks, after the two countries submitted their membership requests.</p> <p>The official applications, handed over by Finland and Sweden's ambassadors to NATO, set a security clock ticking. Russia, whose war on Ukraine spurred them to join the military organization, has warned that it wouldn't welcome such a move, and could respond.</p> <p>"I warmly welcome the requests by Finland and Sweden to join NATO. You are our closest partners," Stoltenberg said. "All allies agree on the importance of NATO enlargement. We all agree that we must stand together, and we all agree that this is an historic moment which we must seize."</p> <p>"This is a good day at a critical moment for our security," a beaming Stoltenberg said, as he stood alongside the two envoys, with NATO, Finnish and Swedish flags at their backs.</p> <p>Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that the alliance stop expanding toward Russia's borders, and several NATO allies, led by the United States and Britain, have signaled that they stand ready to provide security support to Finland and Sweden should he try to provoke or destabilize them during the time it takes to become full members.</p> <p>The countries will only benefit from NATO's Article 5 security guarantee — the part of the alliance's founding treaty that pledges that any attack on one member would be considered an attack of them all — once the membership ratification process is concluded, probably in a few months.</p> <p>For now though, the application must now be weighed by the 30 member countries. That process is expected to take about two weeks, although Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has expressed reservations about Finland and Sweden joining.</p> <p>If his objections are overcome, and accession talks go as well as expected, the two could become members within a few months. The process usually takes eight to 12 months, but NATO wants to move quickly given the threat from Russia hanging over the Nordic countries' heads.</p> <p>Canada, for example, says that it expects to ratify their accession protocol in just a few days.</p> <p>Stoltenberg said that NATO allies "are determined to work through all issues and reach rapid conclusions."</p>

Return to Top	<p>Public opinion in Finland and Sweden has shifted massively in favor of membership since Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24.</p> <p>Finland and Sweden cooperate closely with NATO. They have functioning democracies, well-funded armed forces and contribute to the alliance’s military operations and air policing. Any obstacles they face will merely be of a technical, or possibly political nature.</p> <p>NATO’s membership process is not formalized, and the steps can vary. But first their requests to join will be examined in a sitting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) of the 30 member countries, probably at ambassadorial level.</p> <p>The NAC will decide whether to move toward membership and what steps must be taken to achieve it. This mostly depends on how well aligned the candidate countries are with NATO political, military and legal standards, and whether they contribute to security in the North Atlantic area. This should pose no substantial problem for Finland and Sweden.</p> <p>Moving forward, during accession talks that could be concluded in just one day once the terms of those negotiations are set, the two will be asked to commit to uphold Article 5 and to meet spending obligations concerning the NATO in-house budget, which runs to around \$2.5 billion dollars, split proportionally among what would be 32 member countries.</p> <p>Finland and Sweden would also be made aware of their role in NATO defense planning, and of any other legal or security obligations they might have, like the vetting of personnel and handling of classified information.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 GAO: wealthy escape scrutiny, poor get hit
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/may/17/irs-audits-plummet-wealthy-escape-scrutiny-poorest/
GIST	<p>The IRS has dramatically cut back on audits of the wealthiest Americans over the last decade and the poorest taxpayers are now audited at a higher rate than the middle class, Congress’ chief watchdog reported Tuesday.</p> <p>Every income level is seeing fewer audits, the Government Accountability Office reported, but the biggest drops have come for those at the middle- and upper-income levels.</p> <p>The IRS said that’s because it’s facing staffing shortages and it’s much easier to audit lower-income returns, which aren’t as complex.</p> <p>The result is that those reporting less than \$25,000 in income in 2019 got audited at a rate of 40 in 10,000, while those making \$25,000 to \$500,000 got audited at just 17 out of every 10,000, GAO said.</p> <p>Those making \$5 million or more, meanwhile, were audited at a rate of 235 per 10,000. But a decade earlier, they were audited at more than 1,600 out of 10,000.</p> <p>Meanwhile, taxpayers who claimed the Earned Income Tax Credit, an anti-poverty program embedded in the tax code, were audited at a rate of 77 per 10,000, GAO said.</p> <p>Rep. Bill Pascrell, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee’s oversight panel, called the findings a “five-alarm fire bell for our national tax system.”</p> <p>“Over the last decade, accountability for the wealthiest tax cheats has plummeted so far it almost hits the floor,” he said. “Americans’ confidence in their tax system will itself continue to collapse so long as the rich do whatever they want.”</p>

The IRS told GAO investigators that it has been starved of cash over the last decade, causing its audit rates to drop overall, from about 90 per 10,000 in 2010 to 25 per 10,000 in 2019, the most recent year for which data was available.

High-income taxpayers still get audited at higher rates than returns at the low and middle levels, but they've seen the sharpest drop in their rates.

The IRS blamed staffing and changes in tax filing that make upper-income returns tougher to go through.

Indeed, it takes twice as long to audit an upper-income return now than it did a decade ago. But audits for those making under \$200,000 take roughly the same time as before, the GAO concluded.

"Because audit staffing has decreased, IRS cannot conduct as many of these audits, compared to lower-income audits which are generally less complex and involve more automated processes," the GAO said.

One factor boosting audit rates at the low end is the Earned Income Tax Credit, which goes to the working poor.

Those were audited at nearly twice the rate of the average filer making less than \$25,000, and more than four times the rate of those making \$25,000 to \$500,000.

The IRS said reviews of returns claiming EITC are easy to do because they are limited in scope and "less time consuming." And the EITC is rife with fraud and wrong payment calculations, making it an obvious target for audits, the agency said.

When agents do audit EITC returns, they find the average taxpayer to be \$5,000 in arrears.

Audits of those making \$25,000 to \$200,000 don't amount to much more, with the IRS finding those taxpayers came up an average of \$6,565 short. Rates quickly grow from there, with those making \$500,000 to \$5 million docked nearly \$47,000, and those making \$5 million or more facing a \$284,810 tax bill.

Overall, about 60% of upper-income returns are found to be in arrears. That's up from less than 40% in 2015.

Lower-income tax filers are also facing more frequent bills.

"IRS officials explained that the no-change rate has generally decreased because as IRS does fewer audits, it tends to select returns for audit that have the highest chance of resulting in changes," the GAO said.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Experts: NKorea on brink Covid catastrophe
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/17/north-korea-on-brink-of-covid-19-catastrophe-say-experts
GIST	<p>North Korea stands on the brink of a Covid-19 catastrophe unless swift action is taken to provide vaccines and drug treatments, experts have said, as the number of people reported to have fallen ill rose to almost 1.5 million.</p> <p>The isolated country reported another big rise in new cases of what it continues to refer to as "fever" on Tuesday, days after it admitted it had identified Covid-19 infections for the first time since the start of the global pandemic.</p> <p>It recorded 269,510 additional cases and six more deaths, bringing the total number killed to 56 since late last month. About 1.48 million people have become ill with the virus since the first case was reported last Thursday and at least 663,910 people were in quarantine, according to official figures. The outbreak is almost certainly greater than the official tally, given a lack of tests and resources to monitor and treat the sick.</p>

A significant Covid-19 outbreak could unleash a humanitarian crisis in North Korea, where the economy has been [battered](#) by the pandemic-enforced closure of its border with China – its main trading partner – natural disasters, and years of international sanctions imposed in response to ballistic missile tests.

The regime is not thought to have vaccinated any of its population and does not have access to antiviral drugs that have been used to treat [Covid-19](#) in other countries. Its hospitals have few intensive-care resources to treat severe cases, and widespread malnourishment has made the population of 26 million more susceptible to serious illness.

“It looks really bad,” said Owen Miller, a lecturer in Korean studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. “They are facing the rampant spread of Omicron without protection from vaccines, without much – if any – immunity in the population and without access to most of the drugs that have been used to treat Covid elsewhere.”

Offers of outside help have so far been met with silence. Instead, there is concern that the country’s leader, [Kim Jong-un](#), may be willing to accept a large but “manageable” number of cases and deaths to avoid opening his country up to international scrutiny.

Since it reported its first cases last week, North Korea’s propaganda machine has portrayed the virus as an enemy that can be defeated through lockdowns, quarantine and greater vigilance. The state-run KCNA news agency has reported the delivery of unspecified drugs – “the elixir of life” – to pharmacies by army medical units, and public health campaigns calling for mask-wearing and social distancing.

But testing levels are far below what is needed to form an accurate picture of the outbreak and to quickly identify and isolate patients. Some observers speculated that authorities were deliberately underreporting cases to ease the pressure on Kim.

North Korea has carried out just 64,200 tests since the start of the pandemic, according to the World Health Organization, compared with 172 million in the neighbouring South.

“We were talking about a 0.1% fatality rate for Omicron in South Korea, but that’s going to be significantly higher in North Korea, possibly even reaching 1%, although it’s difficult to make accurate predictions at this point,” said Jung Jae-hun, a professor of preventive medicine at Gachon University.

Kim, who says the outbreak is causing “great turmoil”, finds himself having to balance public health measures with efforts to revive the crumbling economy.

A ruling party member in North Hamgyong province said people were still going to work and markets remained open, reported the Japan-based Asia Press. “There are no bans on going outside. However, we’ve been ordered to double mask,” the unidentified official told the website, which receives information from citizen journalists equipped with contraband Chinese mobile phones.

“People are going to factories and to their places of work as normal. The authorities don’t want work to be disrupted. People get fever checks when they go to and from work.” The official said people were more concerned about being locked down and prevented from working than catching Covid-19. “People are worried about how to survive.”

Some initially interpreted North Korea’s admission that it was battling the virus – after two years of denying it had found a single case – as a plea for help. But it has already refused millions of vaccine doses via the UN-backed Covax scheme, while South Korea says it has yet to receive a response to its offer this week of vaccines, drugs and medical staff.

“I’m sure the North Koreans will still be very wary of accepting major international aid and going back to the situation of the 1990s, when there were multiple different aid agencies operating in the country and

this was felt by the leadership to be humiliating and potentially destabilising,” Miller said, adding that the regime was more likely to turn to China for medical aid.

The Omicron variant has caused significantly fewer deaths and serious cases than previous strains in countries with high vaccination rates, proper medical services and previous exposure to Covid-19.

But that pattern is unlikely to be repeated in North Korea, said Kim Sin-gon, a professor at Korea University College of Medicine in Seoul. “North Korea has many vulnerable people who don’t have strong immune systems,” he said. “Its official inoculation rate is zero and it has no Covid-19 treatment pills.”

Without urgent international help, Kim added, “North Korea may end up with the pandemic’s worst death and infection rates in the world for its population size.”

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HEADLINE	05/17 Moms struggle to find baby formula
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/washington-state-baby-formula-shortage/281-671ab5e8-49e0-4388-9cac-e76c06f47768
GIST	<p>AUBURN, Wash. — "New-mom" anxiety has hit an all-time high as parents across the country struggle to find baby formula due to a nationwide shortage.</p> <p>In April, out-of-stock rates were higher than 40% in several states, including Washington.</p> <p>Bailie McGuire's daughter is just 3 months old. So far, only one baby formula sits well in her stomach.</p> <p>McGuire, who lives in Graham, said the formula has been almost impossible to find.</p> <p>"I have had to now reach out to friends outside of the state to have it shipped to me, which has been really stressful because if the package gets lost and we are running low, we have to put her on something else and then with the fact that she's sensitive, she just gets so sick," explained McGuire.</p> <p>McGuire said she has been looking for the sensitive Enfamil baby formula for over a month now.</p> <p>"Every single morning, I get up at 5 a.m. and I called 16 plus stores to see if they have received a shipment of her formula and if not, we just kind of hope for the next day," said McGuire.</p> <p>Ashlee Ulery is from Washington state but now lives in Juneau, Alaska. She said she has been leaning on her family for help finding formula since they still live in Washington.</p> <p>"My mom goes to Costco, Walmart, she goes to every place trying to find formula for us," explained Ulery. "As well as my sister-in-law [and] my brother."</p> <p>Ulery said most products in Juneau are flown in or come on a barge, which means it can take weeks to get the formula she needs to feed her almost 7-month-old son.</p> <p>"There was a couple weeks back where we had no formula left, and we were on our last can," said Ulery. "We've had to switch his formula three different times because of the shortage."</p> <p>Locally, Care Net of Puget Sound is working to help moms impacted by the formula shortage.</p> <p>The center, which has 10 locations in the Puget Sound region, posted on Facebook saying, "our centers are well-stocked with baby formula for women and families!"</p> <p>Care Net is urging anyone who needs help or emergency formula to give them a call or text, 24/7, at 877-668-2566.</p>

	<p>The Biden administration also launched a web page with a roundup of resources to help families who are unable to find baby formula during the current shortage.</p> <p>The website, HHS.gov/formula, includes manufacturer hotlines for Gerber, Abbott and Reckitts. It also has information about community resources like United Way's 2-1-1 program, Feeding America and the Human Milk Banking Association of North America.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Reduced hours in summer 2 Seattle parks
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/seattles-alki-beach-golden-gardens-hours/281-12d2fe9b-ca8d-4f2c-8672-60e5b6496e87
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Seattle's Alki Beach and Golden Gardens will have reduced hours this summer.</p> <p>The shortened hours are being tested by Seattle Parks and Recreation to address "dangerous and/or illegal behavior" that has been reported in the summer evenings at the two parks.</p> <p>The beach hours will be 4 a.m. to 10 p.m. from May 27 to Sept. 4.</p> <p>Seattle Parks staff, assisted by Seattle police officers, will begin closing the beaches down starting at 9:30 p.m.</p> <p>The reduced hours will be reviewed during a Board of Parks and Recreation Commissioner meeting after they are tested.</p> <p>Alki Beach's hours were reduced last year following multiple violent incidents at the park and concerns about illegal activity. Some of the issues reported at the park during the busier summer months included violence, excessive noise violations, illegal fires and unpermitted events.</p> <p>During one night over Memorial Day weekend of 2021, three people were arrested at the park after multiple fights broke out, illegal beach fires were set and a strong-arm robbery was committed. While police tried to gain control of crowds and break up fights, bottles were thrown at officers and one officer's thumb was broken.</p> <p>In June of 2021, one person was killed and three others were injured in a shooting near the park after two groups got into an argument over fireworks.</p> <p>The early closure was put in place over Fourth of July weekend, and then extended through Sept. 12, 2021, following positive feedback from the community.</p> <p>Starting Sept. 5, the hours at the two beaches will return to normal and be open 4 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Average gas price new high in WA
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/average-gas-price-hits-new-high-washington/C1Y3BDNIMBESDPRSSDJSEYZFK4/
GIST	<p>Nearly every state in the U.S. is above \$4 a gallon for gas, with Washington nearly leading the pack after breaking the \$5 a gallon average on Monday, according to AAA.</p> <p>As of May 17, the average cost for a gallon of gas in Washington is \$5.095, a new highest recorded average price and the fourth-highest in the nation.</p> <p>Just one week ago, the average was \$4.871. One year ago? Only \$3.539 a gallon.</p>

	<p>According to AAA, the increase is due primarily to the high cost of crude oil, which is near \$110 a barrel.</p> <p>“The high cost of oil, the key ingredient in gasoline, is driving these high pump prices for consumers,” said AAA spokesperson Andrew Gross. “Even the annual seasonal demand dip for gasoline during the lull between spring break and Memorial Day, which would normally help lower prices, is having no effect this year.”</p> <p>Consumers are asking if this is the peak, but according to AAA, it may not be.</p> <p>Gasoline in the summer typically adds 7 to 10 cents per gallon, depending on the market.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 WSF experiencing system network issues
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/wsf-experiencing-system-network-outage/PTD2R7HK5FHVBCRLFL7S2V3ZQY/
GIST	<p>A system network issue at Washington State Ferries is affecting various programs.</p> <p>WSF said it’s dealing with a hardware malfunction, which its IT team is working to correct.</p> <p>While it is dealing with the issue, WSF is still working offline and processing payments, route fares and other operations.</p> <p>However, IT is still working on the online reservation system and passengers are asked to be patient.</p> <p>KIRO 7 was told the issue has nothing to do with the rollout of the new ORCA card system, though it has been reported that there are some outages with the ORCA cards, and not exclusively with regard to ferries.</p> <p>Also, the Marion Street Exit at Coleman Dock will open Thursday morning after being closed for major construction for 20 months. This will give ferry commuters easier access when loading and alighting.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Woodland Park reopens after camp cleared
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/residents-start-returning-to-woodland-park-after-city-clears-large-homeless-camp
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Woodland Park reopened one week after the city cleared a sprawling homeless encampment.</p> <p>City crews began clearing debris, garbage, abandoned tents and RVs from the park last Tuesday and also started restoration work to the park's grounds, facilities and recreation areas.</p> <p>Restoration is not yet done. The city said some repairs will take a few more weeks and smaller projects could take months.</p> <p>City park crews were power washing the roof of one of the buildings Tuesday morning while pest control crews were working the grounds and others were doing sewage work.</p> <p>The grounds once covered with tents and tarps have been cleared and now are covered in straw.</p> <p>None of the shelters in the park's upper lot area are ready for use.</p> <p>Some shelters are still missing picnic tables and benches, others need a complete overhaul - including repair work to sinks and charcoal grills.</p>

The park's horseshoe pit is overgrown and has not been tended to - but that didn't stop a father and son from playing a match.

Carl and Jake Gosline were thrilled to be outside, 'ringing it' on a 'beautiful sunny day.'

"I was very pleased when he called and said 'Hey I think the encampment is cleared let's go play,'" said Carl Gosline. "Next time we come out we will bring out a grass clip, shovel and rake."

Groups of people, walkers, runners, and bikers made their way through the park throughout the day. Pascal Golay, cuts through the park on his 3-mile trek to work in Fremont any time he needs to go into the office.

"This was my first occasion to drive through, [it] seems okay, not done but okay," said Pascal, "I'm glad to get the park back and hopefully there is a better solution than just booting people out."

The Seattle mayor's office says 89 people who were living at the park agreed to move indoors.

Most are in temporary housing, including tiny village housing units and enhanced shelters with wrap-around services. A spokesperson for the mayor's office said four people have moved into permanent housing.

Park users we met said they were happy to be back, including Toby Beard, who was playing in bagpipe on a knoll that one week ago housed tents.

"It's nice to have your park back, it feels good to be back," said Beard.

He plays bagpipe for an area fire department and returned to Woodland Park for the first time since covid to practice his instrument. He wonders if it will last, or in time another encampment will sprout back up here.

"It's always a fear, it seems like they're doing a bit of cleanup here so I think that would mean it's a permanent thing, I guess, we will see," said Beard.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Seattle traffic near pre-pandemic levels
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/traffic/seattle-area-traffic-gridlock-congestion-back-at-pre-covid-pandemic-levels-is-this-the-new-normal
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Traffic congestion in the Seattle area has returned almost to where it was before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as more people return to the office.</p> <p>According to data from the Washington State Department of Transportation, traffic volumes across the state are just 5 percent less than they were in 2019.</p> <p>Most drivers in the Seattle area grew accustomed to a lighter commute that would sometimes take them about 25 minutes to get to their destination. But with more cars on the road, that same commute is taking 45 minutes to an hour.</p> <p>"I definitely have to check my phone a lot earlier," said Allison, a Seattle-metro area driver. "Just to see if there's an accident, or if some lane is closed somewhere."</p> <p>Experts say the return to office appears to have an effect on the recent increase in congestion on area freeways and roads, but they've also seen a change in miles per hour.</p> <p>Rob Pishue, a transportation analyst with INRIX Traffic, a Kirkland-based firm that provides location-based data and analytics, said current gridlock is the worst in areas where there has always been congestion.</p>

"The S-curves, or major freeway-to-freeway interchanges, and during the afternoon period, it's almost as bad as it was pre-COVID," he said. "But the bad period is not extending for as long."

INRIX data shows speeds are significantly down from last year, indicating an increase in traffic congestion.

For instance, during the peak morning commute on northbound I-405 from Renton, data shows speeds are down 22 percent from 2021.

On northbound I-5 from Tacoma, data shows speeds are down 14 percent from last year.

Not everyone is hitting the brakes, however.

INRIX found over the last seven weeks that southbound speeds from Lynnwood into Seattle and Bellevue in the morning are up 12 percent, indicating fewer backups.

Pishue says there could be a number of reasons for this.

"Maybe there are fewer cars on the road in those areas, or maybe people are staggering times that they do travel," he said.

During the worst gridlock, it can be nearly impossible to drive more than 10 miles per hour, but The Washington State Patrol wants to remind everyone to drive the speed limit when they can.

"Let's say you're in the left lane, the left lane is for passing, but if you're going slower that's going to incite somebody to potentially be angry about it," Trooper Rick Johnson said.

He said if you feel more comfortable going at a slower speed, get into the far-right lane and be courteous to other drivers.

INRIX analysis said it is difficult to determine whether or not this heavy congestion is here to stay, as major employers like Amazon, Microsoft and Starbucks try to figure out their remote work schedules.

"Employees and employers are still kinda making decisions on what to do," Pishue said. "I think it's safe to say telecommuting and things like that to a large degree are going to be with us for a while."

Drivers should expect heavy traffic all summer long because the [Revive I-5 road project](#) is scheduled for 16 weekends in Seattle.

WSDOT crews will close the southbound lanes of I-5 for repairs.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Covid infections surge western WA
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/covid-19-infections-surgin-g-in-some-washington-counties
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - If it seems like more people in your immediate circle are getting COVID-19, you would be correct.</p> <p>Clallam and San Juan counties have been rated 'high risk' for contracting COVID-19 by the Centers for Disease Control. King, Snohomish and Jefferson counties have moved into the 'medium risk' category.</p> <p>"We are seeing an average of 1,000 cases of COVID per day in King County, so that's why you are seeing more people around you become infected," said King County interim health director Dennis Worsham. "Keep in mind, this is much lower than the 5,000 cases per day we were seeing during the omicron surge in January."</p>

King and Snohomish counties moved to ‘medium risk’ after crossing the threshold of 200 cases per 100,000 people. King County has a seven-day average of 200 cases per 100,000, and Snohomish County is averaging 218.

San Juan County just moved to ‘high risk’ with 444 cases per 100,000, and Clallam County is considered high risk with its hospitalization rates. Jefferson County is considered medium risk because of its hospitalization rate.

Not included in the CDC case count are people who tested positive with a home COVID test and did not report their results to health officials.

"We are definitely recommending people wear masks whether you're vaccinated or not, if you are in close proximity of others at indoor settings," said Worsham.

He said the current variation of COVID is a subset of omicron, and January's surge [may have helped immunity](#).

"Because we had such high exposure in our first round, we are seeing a natural immunity certainly playing a factor in less illnesses this time," said Worsham.

He said King County has an initial vaccination rate of over 80%, but the booster rate is at 60%—and he says that needs to be higher.

"The good thing is, I think we are starting to plateau from this current surge," he said.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Ukraine holdouts in Mariupol surrender
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/world/europe/ukraine-mariupol-fighters-surrender.html
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — Hundreds of die-hard Ukrainian soldiers who had made a last stand against Russian forces from a Mariupol steel mill faced an uncertain future Tuesday under Kremlin custody after Ukraine's military ordered them to surrender.</p> <p>The surrender directive, issued late Monday, made the soldiers prisoners and ended the most protracted battle so far of the nearly three-month-old Russian invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>Even as Russia has struggled on other battlefronts, the surrender at Mariupol solidified one of Russia's few significant territorial achievements — the conquest of a once-thriving southeast port. The surrender also gave Russia's state-run media the ingredients for claiming its side was winning.</p> <p>Still, Mariupol has been largely reduced to ruin, Ukrainian officials say that more than 20,000 inhabitants were killed, and the city has come to symbolize the war's grotesque horrors.</p> <p>By early Tuesday, many of the fighters ensconced in a warren of shelters under the Azovstal steel mill, a Soviet-era complex besieged by the Russians for weeks, had emerged and surrendered. They were transported to Russian-held territory aboard buses emblazoned with “Z” — the Russian emblem for what President Vladimir V. Putin has called his country's “special military operation” in Ukraine.</p> <p>The Ukrainian authorities said little about the terms of the surrender except to assert that the Ukrainian fighters were heroes and that as prisoners they would soon be exchanged for Russian prisoners held by Ukraine.</p> <p>“The only thing that can be said is that the Ukrainian state is doing everything possible and impossible” to save the soldiers, Ukraine's deputy defense minister, Hanna Malyar, said at a news conference Tuesday afternoon.</p>

But Russian officials said nothing about an exchange — on the contrary, they raised the prospect that at least some of the prisoners would be treated as war criminals.

Russia's Investigative Committee, the country's equivalent to the F.B.I., said Tuesday that investigators would interrogate the captured fighters to "check their involvement in crimes committed against civilians."

And the prosecutor general's office asked Russia's Supreme Court to declare the military unit to which most of the captured fighters belong, the Azov battalion, a terrorist organization. Russian news media have seized on the Azov battalion's connections to far-right movements to provide a veneer of credibility to the Kremlin's false claims that Russia's forces were fighting Nazis in Ukraine.

The Russian threats against the prisoners raised questions about the viability of the terms Ukraine had negotiated with Moscow to surrender, and whether the hundreds of troops still remaining inside the steel plant would abide by the deal.

News of Ukraine's surrender order to its own fighters, widely seen domestically as heroes who have stared down deprivation and doom, was greeted with anxiety in the country, where antipathy toward Russia has only deepened since the war.

Many expressed fears that the last defenders of Mariupol would suffer as prisoners of Russia — though the most likely alternative was certain death inside the steel works.

"I am waiting for news and praying," said Natalia Zarytska, who was part of a delegation of wives and mothers of men inside Azovstal who had sought the intervention of Turkey, which has good relations with both Russia and Ukraine, to assure a safe evacuation route for their loved ones.

The Ukrainian government sought to extol the valor of the fighters, who refused to surrender until ordered.

"83 days of Mariupol defense will go down in history as the Thermopylae of the XXI century," Mykhailo Podolyak, one of President Volodymyr Zelensky's top advisers, [said on Twitter](#), referring to the [480 B.C. battle](#) in which an outnumbered force of Greeks faced a much larger Persian army. He said the defenders in Azovstal had "ruined" Russia's plan to capture eastern Ukraine and "completely changed the course of the war."

Still, the fate of the captured soldiers could create political problems for Mr. Zelensky, whose leadership through the war has boosted his popularity at home and in friendly Western countries.

Mr. Putin could also face an awkward decision over releasing any of the captives — even in a prisoner swap — since he has repeatedly sought to cast Azov battalion members as Nazis. Repatriating them could undercut that fictitious narrative.

Ukraine's decision to halt the armed defense at the plant appeared to end the last vestige of resistance preventing Russia from fully controlling a swath of southeastern Ukraine stretching from the Russian border to the Crimean Peninsula, which was [seized by Russia](#) eight years ago.

The developments in the south underscore how much territory Moscow has captured and suggest that Ukrainian forces will face steep challenges in trying to regain it. At the same time, Ukraine's military has been emboldened by its successes against Russian forces elsewhere, so the prospects for a negotiated settlement have dimmed.

Both sides acknowledge that [talks have basically collapsed](#) amid publicly aired recriminations.

Along a path stretching more than 500 miles from Luhansk in the east to Kherson on the Black Sea, the Ukrainian military said Russian forces were building defensive positions, installing governments with fealty to the Kremlin and taking steps to "Russify" the population.

In Zaporizhzhia, a region west of Mariupol, the Ukrainian military said that Russian forces had been destroying roads and bridges to slow Ukrainian counterattacks. Moscow's troops also erected concrete barriers and dug trenches around Europe's largest nuclear power plant, in the city of Enerhodar, which Russia seized in the first month of the war, Ukraine's nuclear power company said.

In the Russia-occupied Kherson region, the nation's agricultural heartland, the Ukrainians have been mounting counterattacks for weeks, slowly trying to reclaim lost ground, but have yet to launch a major offensive.

The Ukrainian military said Tuesday evening that Russia was taking steps to prepare for a long-term military occupation. "The war is entering a protracted phase," the Ministry of Defense said in a statement. "We see how in the Kherson region, in the Zaporizhzhia region, the Russian invaders are actively carrying out engineering and fortification work to move to defense if necessary."

Still, Ukrainian forces, backed by an increasing flow of heavy weapons from Western allies, have mounted fierce resistance on other battle fronts, driving Russian forces first from the capital, Kyiv, and in recent days from the northeastern city of Kharkiv.

Ukrainian officials said Tuesday that more than 50 "seriously injured" fighters from Mariupol were being transported to a hospital in Novoazovsk, a Ukrainian town near the Russian border that is controlled by Moscow-backed separatists. Another 211 people were evacuated via a humanitarian corridor to Olenivka, also under Russian control.

Ukrainian officials said that the soldiers would be returned to Ukrainian-held territory "under an exchange procedure."

However, it was unclear who was guaranteeing the security of the servicemen and whether any procedure had been agreed upon before the evacuation began.

"Those 211 people who were evacuated to Olenivka, their fate is paramount to negotiate about right now," Kira Rudik, a member of parliament and leader of the Holos party, involved in negotiations about Azovstal, said on Tuesday afternoon.

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HEADLINE	05/17 NKorea Covid outbreak continuing to spiral
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/world/asia/north-korea-covid.html
GIST	<p>North Korea said the number of suspected coronavirus infections in the vulnerable, isolated country was nearing 1.5 million on Tuesday, and that the virus had caused 56 deaths there since April.</p> <p>State media has recently been reporting hundreds of thousands of new patients a day with fevers, without saying how many of them had tested positive for the coronavirus. North Korea's health system probably does not have the capacity for large-scale testing.</p> <p>Before the country's current Covid outbreak was first reported last week, North Korea had claimed for more than two years that it had not had a single case of the coronavirus. Most of the country's 25 million people are unvaccinated against the virus, and the country has rebuffed repeated international offers of millions of vaccine doses.</p> <p>The World Health Organization has offered to provide technical support and supplies to fight the outbreak, including diagnostic tests, essential medicines and vaccines, the organization's director general, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said on Tuesday.</p>

“W.H.O. is deeply concerned at the risk of further spread of Covid-19 in the country, particularly because the population is unvaccinated and many have underlying conditions putting them at risk of severe disease and death,” he said at a news conference in Geneva.

North Korea’s capital, Pyongyang, remained locked down on Monday under a “maximum emergency epidemic prevention system,” according to the state-run Korea Central News Agency, and the military was reported to be distributing medication. Officials had earlier ordered all cities and counties across the nation to lock down, saying the coronavirus was spreading “explosively.”

Uncontrolled spread of the virus could be particularly lethal in North Korea. The country’s already meager health system has been undercut and drained of resources by some of the world’s strictest pandemic border closures, cutting off supplies from China. The few international aid organizations that had been operating there have been forced to withdraw.

North Korea has also been facing its worst food crisis in decades, after extensive flooding in 2021, probably leaving its people more malnourished and in poorer health than before.

“Medicines of any kind are scarce in the country, and the health care infrastructure is extremely fragile, lacking medical supplies such as oxygen and other Covid-19 therapeutics,” Lina Yoon, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch, [wrote in a report](#), urging governments and the United Nations to try to persuade the country to accept outside aid. “North Koreans are facing a uniquely acute catastrophe, and the world should not turn away,” Ms. Yoon wrote.

The recent restrictions and the isolation of people with suspected Covid infections could be catastrophic for North Koreans who were already vulnerable, including children, lactating mothers and older people, a spokesperson for the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a statement.

Some outside observers of North Korea cautioned against taking state media reports about the pandemic at face value. They cast doubt on whether the country had really been spared past waves of the virus and questioned why the country had suddenly begun giving detailed daily reports on the outbreak.

Choi Jung-hun, who worked as a physician and local public health official in North Korea before fleeing the country in 2011, said the reports could be a way for the government to justify keeping the population under oppressive measures as the economic impact of isolation deepens. He said that the tally of 56 reported deaths as suspiciously low, compared with the reported number of suspected cases, especially given the state of the country’s health care system.

“The internal discontent is high, and they need an explanation,” Mr. Choi said.

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HEADLINE	05/17 FDA: Pfizer booster children age 5 to 11
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/17/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases#fda-pfizer-booster-children
GIST	<p>The Food and Drug Administration authorized booster shots of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on Tuesday for children 5 to 11, the latest in a series of actions intended to bolster waning protection against infection from the coronavirus vaccines.</p> <p>More than eight million of the 28 million children in that age group in the United States have received two vaccine shots, and will now be eligible for the extra dose at least five months after their second shot. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is considered highly likely to recommend the booster dose after an advisory committee of outside experts meets to discuss it on Thursday.</p> <p>That would make all Americans 5 and older eligible for a booster shot. But booster uptake has been much slower than public health experts hoped; many parents have been reluctant to vaccinate children in this age group at all.</p>

Although they have been eligible for Covid shots since November, only 29 percent of 5- to 11- year-olds have received two doses. Another six percent or so have received one shot.

In a statement, Dr. Robert M. Califf, the F.D.A.'s commissioner, said: "While it has largely been the case that Covid-19 tends to be less severe in children than adults, the Omicron wave has seen more kids getting sick with the disease and being hospitalized, and children may also experience longer term effects, even following initially mild disease."

Some experts have suggested that because children 5 to 11 received a much lower initial dose than older children or adults, they are particularly in need of a booster shot. One study done by New York researchers found that for children 5 to 11, the Pfizer vaccine's effectiveness against infection fell to 12 percent from 68 percent by four to five weeks after the second dose.

[Another C.D.C. study](#) stated that two Pfizer doses reduced the risk of Omicron infection by 31 percent among those 5 to 11, compared with a 59 percent reduction in risk among those 12 to 15. Dr. Peter Marks, the F.D.A.'s top vaccine regulator, said that "emerging data suggest that vaccine effectiveness against Covid-19 wanes after the second dose of the vaccine" in all age groups.

The newly authorized booster dose is the same strength as the first two shots. Pfizer has said its clinical trial data showed that the additional shot produced a strong immune response in the age group, generating neutralizing antibodies against both the Omicron variant and original version of the virus. No new safety signal were observed, according to the company.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Shanghai: Covid outbreak under control
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/17/world/covid-19-mandates-vaccine-cases#shanghai-covid
GIST	<p>Shanghai health officials said on Tuesday that the city had brought the Covid outbreak there under control, after a nearly two-month lockdown that disrupted residents' access to food and medicine, stoked widespread public outrage and brought China's financial center to a standstill.</p> <p>At a news conference, officials pledged to restart normal life as soon as possible, with a goal of reopening fully by June. Some businesses, bus lines and parks had been allowed to resume operations on Monday. Twelve trains were also allowed to leave from Shanghai's Hongqiao train station on Monday, with more than 6,000 passengers aboard, according to state news media.</p> <p>The city recorded 823 new coronavirus cases on Monday, all in people who had been in quarantine or in areas under increased surveillance. Officials declared they had achieved "societal zero," a term used by the Chinese authorities to indicate the absence of uncontrolled community transmission.</p> <p>More than 620,000 cases and 576 deaths have been recorded in Shanghai's recent outbreak, which began growing rapidly in March. It was the worst outbreak China has faced since the virus first emerged in Wuhan in early 2020.</p> <p>State media outlets shared images of residents buying groceries and getting haircuts. "Shanghai's cooking oil smell is returning," said one hashtag promoted by Xinhua, the state news agency, using a Chinese phrase to describe daily life.</p> <p>But even as state media celebrated, some Shanghai residents pushed back, noting that they were still under strict lockdown measures. Under the Xinhua post on Weibo, a Twitter-like platform, the most-liked comment was by a user who said they had just finished doing another mandatory coronavirus test and were still not allowed to leave their neighborhood. Others said they still could not receive deliveries and were running low on essentials.</p> <p>Even in areas with looser restrictions, residents who were allowed to leave their neighborhoods had to first receive permission from neighborhood officials, and could only be out for a certain amount of time and in certain areas, state media acknowledged.</p>

	<p>Schools remain closed, as do theaters, gyms and other cultural venues. The city would prioritize restarting work at industrial facilities, said Zong Ming, a deputy mayor.</p> <p>In a widely shared article on WeChat, titled “Is ‘Shanghai’s cooking oil smell returning’ a lie?” a blogger there, Zhang Pei, wrote that many friends elsewhere had messaged her to congratulate her on the city reopening. But she did not know how to respond, as her complex remained sealed.</p> <p>“We really feel like we are living in a parallel universe,” she wrote. “We don’t know who has gone to work, where has returned to business.”</p> <p>In a jab at state news media’s tendency to dismiss any bad news as rumors or isolated incidents, she added: “When it’s good news, as long as it’s true in one place, that’s the same as it being true everywhere, and it’s not a rumor. When it’s bad news, as long as it’s not true everywhere, then that’s the same as it not existing.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Tacoma scenic route closes to vehicles
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/matt-driscoll/article261496027.html
GIST	<p>A beloved attraction at Tacoma’s Point Defiance Park has fallen victim to Mother Nature and the impacts of climate change.</p> <p>On Friday, May 20, the outer loop of Five Mile Drive will close to vehicle traffic, according to a memo from Metro Parks executive director Shon Sylvia sent to Tacoma city manager Elizabeth Pauli.</p> <p>There are no plans to reopen the route to vehicle traffic, according to the memo, which was provided to The News Tribune late last week.</p> <p>The decision to permanently close the outer loop of Five Mile Drive to vehicles was made after a geotechnical assessment earlier this year identified “ongoing erosion and slope instability impacting the bluff,” particularly near well-known viewpoints, the May 13 memo indicates.</p> <p>Pedestrian and bike access — which Metro Parks has determined doesn’t pose “the same level of threat to the bluffs as continued vehicle use” — will remain unchanged, at least for the time being, according to the memo.</p> <p>A public announcement of the closure will occur Tuesday, according to Sylvia, who confirmed Metro Parks’ decision.</p> <p>Sylvia told The News Tribune that climate change is a significant factor in the conditions at Point Defiance Park.</p> <p>“We have observed what appears to be an acceleration of erosion of the bluffs, and the roadway is now very close to the edge in some areas, especially the viewpoints,” Sylvia’s memo reads in part. “Our decision to permanently close the drive to vehicles is a direct response to the seeming acceleration of erosion impacted by multiple forces of nature, including heavier rainfall to the top of the peninsula and stronger waves cutting into its slope from below.”</p> <p>“We are respecting nature’s power and pulling back from the land’s edge to protect the public and will not attempt to engineer controls for the inevitable power of natural forces,” the memo indicates.</p> <p>WHAT IT MEANS FOR TACOMA</p> <p>According to Marty Stump, Metro Parks’ chief planning officer, the outer loop of Five Mile Drive has already been closed to buses and other heavy vehicles.</p>

The agency received the geotechnical assessment in January, and staff has spent the last several months reacting and reviewing its findings, Stump said.

Erosion at Point Defiance Park is nothing new. The latest risk assessment is similar to previous reports and master planning efforts — dating back more than a decade — that concluded erosion on the bluffs at Point Defiance Park likely would pose a threat to the outer loop road at some point in the future, Stump told The News Tribune.

While Stump said there isn't an "imminent risk" of landslides at Point Defiance Park, he said the latest assessment was enough for Metro Parks to decide now was the time to take "immediate action."

"The erosion of those banks has now encroached to a proximity to their roadway edge that Metro Parks feels that it's time to discontinue vehicular traffic on that roadway, out of an abundance of caution. We need to protect the park, visitors and patrons first and foremost," Stump said.

"We do attribute that to the changes in the climate and the weather patterns we have here," he added.

Stump acknowledged the park district's decision to permanently close the outer loop to vehicles has the potential to cause anger and disappointment in the community.

Maintaining some level of vehicle access at Point Defiance is important, he said, because that's how many people — including those with disabilities or mobility issues — access the park.

Stump indicated that Metro Parks is in the early stages of assessing alternative routes for vehicles, including the potential use of public transit and electric trams. In the future that could include rebuilding a road further away from the bluffs, though such a project likely would be challenging and result in a significant loss of trees and forest area, he said.

Another option being explored is developing a bypass service road that's already in the park, which would allow for vehicle access further away from the bluffs, Stump said.

"At least from our perspective, I would say that rises to a preferred option, knowing everything that we know today," Stump said. "But we need to tease that out with some additional analysis — like cost considerations (and) environmental impact."

Either project would be contingent on the availability of funding and the successful completion of the permitting process.

Opening a new road at Point Defiance Park could take "a year and a half to two years, at best, perhaps longer if we run into other issues," Stump said.

He promised the public would have ample opportunity to weigh in along the way.

THE FUTURE OF POINT DEFIANCE

The permanent closure of Five Mile Drive is the end of an era in Tacoma.

For decades, the scenic route has been a go-to destination for Tacoma and Pierce County residents trying to impress someone from out of town, escape from the hustle and bustle of the city, or simply spend time fending off the hungry raccoons who rarely seemed deterred by signs urging visitors not to feed them.

According to Point Defiance's historic property management plan, Five Mile Drive was originally laid out and graded in 1913, "as the roadway around the entire park beginning at the Pearl Street entrance and ending back at Pearl Street, with paving coming later."

	<p>“The introduction of Five Mile Drive improved circulation throughout the park and opened up the remote portions of the park for automobile traffic, including the automobile touring ‘buses’ used in other parks at that time,” the archive indicates.</p> <p>The closure of Tacoma’s most popular scenic drives provides a jarring example of the visible impact of climate change.</p> <p>It also provides an opportunity for Tacoma to rethink and rediscover Point Defiance Park, whether it’s ready to or not.</p> <p>During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Five Mile Drive was closed to vehicle traffic but remained open to pedestrians and cyclists.</p> <p>More recently, the outer loop has only been open to vehicle traffic Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.</p> <p>In the absence of vehicles, new opportunities arrive at Point Defiance, Stump said.</p> <p>Maintaining access for as many people as possible will remain a primary objective for Metro Parks — including for the exploration of public transit options — but a future that’s “less auto dependent” isn’t necessarily a bad thing, he said.</p> <p>“We want some portion of that park to always be available to you if you’re driving a car,” Stump said.</p> <p>“This road where it is today is an untenable situation. We need to find a solution, and it’s going to take time to do so.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 WHO: 2nd booster benefits most vulnerable
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/who-2nd-covid-booster-for-most-vulnerable-offers-benefits/
GIST	<p>GENEVA (AP) — An expert group convened by the World Health Organization says there may be some benefit in giving a second booster dose of coronavirus vaccine to the most vulnerable people amid the continuing global spread of omicron and its subvariants.</p> <p>In a statement issued on Tuesday, the United Nations health agency said there was “a growing body of evidence regarding the value of an additional booster dose” for groups including health workers, people aged over 60 and those with weak immune systems.</p> <p>The WHO said its expert group had assessed the limited data from seven studies for second booster doses of messenger RNA vaccines, saying there wasn’t enough information proving their effectiveness in younger, healthy people.</p> <p>“In those most at risk for severe disease or death ... the additional benefit of an additional booster dose of mRNA vaccine might be warranted,” the WHO said, acknowledging that there could be logistical or other challenges to offering people a second booster dose in some countries. While many rich countries have vaccinated more than 70% of their populations, fewer than 16% of people in poorer countries have been immunized.</p> <p>Last year, the WHO repeatedly criticized rich countries for offering booster doses and called for a moratorium on the practice, saying boosters were unnecessary for healthy people. The agency reversed its advice late last year amid the spread of the hugely infectious omicron variant, after dozens of countries began offering booster doses.</p>

	<p>Some health experts have warned that countries embarking on additional booster campaigns could deplete the world's supply of COVID-19 vaccines before the most vulnerable people in developing countries have been offered a single shot.</p> <p>The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommended in March that Americans 50 and over be eligible for a second COVID-19 booster shot while the European Medicines Agency has only cleared second booster doses for those 80 and over.</p> <p>Amid the continuing spread of omicron and its subvariants, the WHO and others have continued to call for accelerated vaccination campaigns.</p> <p>“What we are seeing is that people who are vaccinated have a much reduced risk of developing severe disease and death,” said WHO’s COVID-19 lead Maria Van Kerkhove, warning against the false perception that omicron is mild. “We have solutions for this because we have vaccines,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/16 Covid or flu? New at-home test can tell
SOURCE	https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-16/is-it-covid-or-flu-new-at-home-test-spots-multiple-viruses
GIST	<p>An at-home Covid-19 test that can also detect other common respiratory viruses like the flu was authorized for emergency use Monday by the US Food and Drug Administration.</p> <p>The test is made by Labcorp, a laboratory testing company based in North Carolina, and is the first non-prescription test authorized to look for multiple respiratory viruses in one sample. Covid symptoms can be similar to those from other respiratory illnesses like the flu and respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, so the new test is meant to help people more easily determine which virus they have.</p> <p>Labcorp’s test consists of a nasal swab, performed at home, which is then sent to the company for testing. Diagnostic results from the test are provided through an online portal. If the test is positive, a health care professional will follow up, a release says. The tests can be purchased online or in stores.</p> <p>“This is the first test authorized for flu and RSV, along with COVID-19, where an individual can self-identify their need for a test, order it, collect their sample and send it to the lab for testing, without consulting a health care professional,” Jeff Shuren, director of FDA’s Center for Devices and Radiological Health, said in a statement.</p> <p>Shuren also said the U.S. is moving closer to diagnostic testing for respiratory viruses that can be performed entirely at home.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 UK: 4 more cases of ‘monkeypox’
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/cases-monkeypox-reported-uk/story?id=84749225
GIST	<p>Several people in England have tested positive for monkeypox, according to the U.K. Health Security Agency.</p> <p>Officials announced Monday four more cases of the rare disease have been detected, bringing the total to seven.</p> <p>The most recent infections do not seem to be connected to the first case confirmed May 7 in a person who had recently traveled to Nigeria.</p> <p>But the most recent four cases had not traveled to a region where monkeypox is endemic, raising the possibility that the virus could be circulating within the U.K.</p>

Additionally, the most recent people to test positive self-identified as gay, bisexual or men who have sex with men, leading health authorities to advise people in those groups to watch out for rashes or lesions.

"This is rare and unusual," Dr. Susan Hopkins, chief medical adviser for UKHSA, said in a statement. "UKHSA is rapidly investigating the source of these infections because the evidence suggests that there may be transmission of the monkeypox virus in the community, spread by close contact."

What is monkeypox?

Monkeypox is a rare disease caused by the monkeypox virus.

It was first identified in 1958 when two outbreaks of a pox-like disease occurred in crab-eating macaque monkeys that were being used for research, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

The first case among humans was recorded in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1970, and the illness has since spread to several other nations, mostly in central and western Africa.

How monkeypox is transmitted

Monkeypox can transmit from animals to humans when an infected animal -- such as a rodent or a primate -- bites or scratches a person.

The CDC said humans can also be infected when hunting wild animals or preparing bush meat for consumption.

The disease can also spread from person-to-person via large respiratory droplets in the air, but they cannot travel more than a few feet so two people would need to have prolonged close contact.

What are the symptoms?

The incubation period for monkeypox is between seven and 14 days, and symptoms are generally mild, according to the CDC.

The most common symptoms include fever, headache, fatigue and muscle aches.

In more severe cases, patients can develop a rash and lesions that often begin on the face before spreading to the rest of the body.

Most people recover within two to four weeks. Although there have been no cases of death reported in the U.S., monkeypox has led to death in as many as 1 in 10 people in Africa who contract the disease.

Monkeypox detection in the U.S.

Very few cases of monkeypox have been identified among Americans.

According to the CDC, the disease does not naturally occur in the U.S. and infections are usually identified among people who recently traveled to countries where monkeypox is more commonly found.

In 2003, 47 confirmed and probable cases were reported among six U.S. states, the first human cases reported outside of Africa.

All the infections occurred after coming into contact with pet prairie dogs, which in turn became infected "after being housed near imported small mammals from Ghana," the CDC stated.

Since then, just two other cases have been detected in the U.S., both associated with travel.

In July 2021, a case was confirmed in a Texas resident who had recently returned from Nigeria and in November 2021, another case was found in a Maryland resident who had also traveled to Nigeria.

Treatment and prevention of monkeypox

	<p>Currently, there are no specific treatments available for monkeypox. Antivirals typically used for smallpox have been shown to be effective in lab studies and in animal trials.</p> <p>One vaccine has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for use in those aged 18 and older at high risk for monkeypox or smallpox.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/18 Japan plan: release Fukushima wastewater
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/japan-oks-plan-release-fukushima-nuclear-plant-wastewater-84800836
GIST	<p>TOKYO -- Japan's nuclear regulator on Wednesday approved plans by the operator of the wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant to release its treated radioactive wastewater into the sea next year, saying the outlined methods are safe and risks to the environment minimal.</p> <p>The plan was submitted by the Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings in December based on the government's decision last year to release the wastewater as a necessary step for the ongoing plant cleanup and decommission.</p> <p>A massive earthquake and tsunami in 2011 destroyed the Fukushima plant's cooling systems, causing the meltdown of three reactors and the release of large amounts of radiation. Water that has been used to cool the three damaged reactor cores, which remain highly radioactive, has since leaked but was collected and stored in tanks.</p> <p>There is still concern in the community and neighboring countries about the potential health hazards of the release of the wastewater that includes tritium — a byproduct of nuclear power production and a possible carcinogen at high levels.</p> <p>The government and TEPCO say more than 60 isotopes selected for treatment can be lowered to meet safety standards, except for tritium, but that it is safe if diluted. Scientists say impact of long term low-dose exposure to the environment and humans are unknown, and that tritium can have a bigger impact on humans when consumed in fish than in water.</p> <p>Japan nuclear authority chairman Toyoshi Fuketa said that the plan is made conservatively so the radiation impact on the environment could be still below the legal limit in case of any thinkable risks.</p> <p>Under the plan, TEPCO will transport water that has been treated to below releasable levels through a pipeline from the tanks to a coastal facility, where the water is diluted with seawater.</p> <p>From there, the water will enter an undersea tunnel to be discharged at a point about 1 kilometer (0.6 mile) from the plant to ensure safety and minimize the impact on local fishing and the environment, according to TEPCO.</p> <p>The plan will become official after a 30-day public review, a formality that is not expected to overturn the approval.</p> <p>The green light came just as the International Atomic Energy Agency's Director Mariano Grossi arrived in Japan for meetings with top officials to discuss the plan, which has received international attention.</p> <p>Fuketa will meet with Grossi on Friday after the IAEA director's visit to the Fukushima plant on Thursday and meetings with other Japanese officials.</p> <p>The government and TEPCO plan to begin gradually releasing the treated water in spring 2023.</p>

	<p>The contaminated water is being stored in about 1,000 tanks at the damaged plant, which officials say must be removed so that facilities can be built for its decommissioning. The tanks are expected to reach their capacity of 1.37 million tons next year — slower than an earlier estimate of later this year.</p> <p>Japan has sought the IAEA's assistance to ensure the water release meets international safety standards, and to reassure local fishing and other communities as well as neighboring countries that have sharply criticized the plan.</p> <p>A team of experts from the IAEA visited the plant in February and March for meetings with Japanese government and TEPCO officials. The task force, in a report issued late April, said Japan is making "significant progress" on the plan and taking appropriate steps toward the planned discharge.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Mali: coup attempt by western govt. foiled
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mali-arrests-suspects-announcing-foiled-coup-attempt-84782997
GIST	<p>BAMAKO, Mali -- Malian authorities have arrested suspects after an announcement by the ruling junta that it had foiled a coup attempt supported by an unnamed Western government.</p> <p>Security forces thwarted the countercoup against two-time coup leader Col. Assimi Goita, according to a government statement.</p> <p>The army on Tuesday said that authorities arrested suspects who are being questioned.</p> <p>"For the moment, investigations and interrogations of those arrested are underway and it is after this work that details can be communicated to the public," Mali army spokesman Col. Souleymane Dembélé said.</p> <p>Early Tuesday, a list of several Malian military personnel suspected in the attempt was circulated throughout the intelligence community, according to a Malian security official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not permitted to speak to the media on the issue.</p> <p>"These soldiers were supported by a Western state," said the initial announcement of the foiled coup. The junta's statement, read by government spokesman Col. Abdoulaye Maiga on television Monday night, gave few details but said security forces had put down the coup last week.</p> <p>The news of a failed countercoup comes as Mali faces domestic political uncertainty and international isolation as the ruling junta has announced it intends to stay in power longer than it had earlier announced.</p> <p>Mali's relations with former colonizer France have deteriorated significantly under the rule of Goita, who led coups in 2020 and again in 2021 when the transitional government showed signs of being independent from him. Goita then declared himself president of the West African nation and recently said his junta would stay in power for another two years.</p> <p>Earlier this year Goita ordered French troops to leave. France later announced it would withdraw its estimated 5,000 troops after spending nine years fighting the country's Islamic extremist rebels.</p> <p>The accusations of foreign interference come as Goita's regime becomes increasingly isolated within West Africa. Earlier this week, Mali announced that it was pulling out of a five-nation regional counterterrorism force known as the G5 because it appeared other members did not accept that Goita should take over the rotating leadership of the force.</p> <p>The longer transition period and Mali's growing regional and international isolation create a favorable environment for attempts to destabilize the junta, according to Malian analyst Brehima Dicko, researcher at the University of Bamako.</p>

	<p>“Mali is at the end of what can be called the first transition of 18 months, which was widely agreed upon by Malians and countries in the region, such as the ECOWAS organization, following the first coup in 2020. Therefore from this moment on there may be other military personnel who may attempt a coup,” he said. “It’s also possible that disgruntled soldiers who served under former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita may feel isolated and want to stage a coup to return to previous leaderships.”</p> <p>After seizing power in 2020, Goita's junta initially agreed to an 18-month transition to return to civilian rule, but it failed to organize elections by the deadline in February. Last month, the government said it would need an additional two years in power before it could organize a vote.</p> <p>Dicko said the country identified as Western by Mali’s government may not necessarily be France.</p> <p>“Even if there is a real tension between France and Mali, this Western country mentioned in the government’s communiqué can be any country that wants to position itself in the geopolitics of the Sahel,” he added.</p> <p>France and other nations sharply condemned the August 2020 overthrow of Mali’s democratically elected president Keita and the second coup by Goita just nine months later.</p> <p>This is not the first attempt to destabilize Mali’s ruling junta. Last year, a man armed with a knife tried to slit Goita’s throat while he was taking part in the Tabaski prayer at a large mosque in the capital, Bamako.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 US eases economic sanctions on Venezuela
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/us-ease-economic-sanctions-venezuela-84778979
GIST	<p>CARACAS, Venezuela -- The United States government is moving to ease a few economic sanctions on Venezuela in a gesture meant to encourage resumed negotiations between the U.S.-backed opposition and the government of President Nicolás Maduro.</p> <p>The limited changes will allow Chevron Corp. to negotiate its license with the state-owned oil company, PDVSA, but not to drill or export any petroleum of Venezuelan origin, two senior U.S. government officials told The Associated Press late Monday. The officials spoke under the condition of anonymity because the formal announcement had not been made.</p> <p>Additionally, Carlos Erik Malpica-Flores — a former high-ranking PDVSA official and nephew of Venezuela’s first lady — will be removed from a list of sanctioned individuals, they said.</p> <p>Hours after the announcement Tuesday, the opposition and Venezuela's government acknowledged they had begun conversations on possibly restarting negotiations.</p> <p>The moves follow goodwill gestures by Maduro after meeting in March with representatives of the administration of President Joe Biden and a recent gathering in Central America between U.S. officials and the main Unitary Platform opposition coalition to discuss a path forward.</p> <p>“These are things that ... the Unitary Platform negotiated and came to us to request that we do in order for them to be able to return to the negotiating table,” one of the officials said.</p> <p>Scores of Venezuelans, including the country's attorney general and the head of the penitentiary system, and more than 140 entities, among them Venezuela's Central Bank, will remain sanctioned. The Treasury Department will continue to prohibit transactions with the Venezuelan government and PDVSA within U.S. financial markets.</p> <p>Maduro himself is under indictment in the United States, accused of conspiring “to flood the United States with cocaine” and use the drug trade as a “weapon against America.”</p>

Venezuela's government suspended talks with the opposition in October after the extradition to the U.S. of a key Maduro ally on money laundering charges. Maduro at the time conditioned his return to the negotiating table on the release from custody of businessman Alex Saab, who was extradited from the African nation of Cape Verde.

The negotiations took place in Mexico City under the guidance of Norwegian diplomats.

California-based Chevron is the last major U.S. oil company to do business in Venezuela, where it first invested in the 1920s. Its four joint ventures with PDVSA produced about 200,000 barrels a day in 2019, but the U.S. government ordered it in 2020 to wind down production, and since then, it has only been allowed to carry out essential work on oil wells to preserve its assets and employment levels in Venezuela.

The change allows "Chevron to negotiate the terms of the potential future activities in Venezuela," a senior U.S. official told reporters Tuesday. "It does not allow entry into any agreement with PDVSA or any other activity involving PDVSA or ... Venezuela's oil sector. So, fundamentally, what they are doing is just allowed to talk."

Chevron did not immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday. The company's investments in Venezuela's oil fields and machinery over the last century had an estimated value of \$2.6 billion as of 2020.

Venezuela sits atop the world's largest oil reserves, yet its political upheaval and economic decline have pushed more than 6 million people to migrate in recent years. About three quarters of those who remain live on less than \$1.90 a day, considered the international standard for extreme poverty, and many lack access to clean, running water and electricity.

The U.S. and other countries withdrew recognition of Maduro after accusing him of rigging his 2018 reelection as president. In his place, they recognized Juan Guaidó, who was head of the then-opposition-dominated congress and remains the leader of the Unitary Platform.

For the past five years, the U.S. has used punishing financial and personal sanctions, criminal indictments and support for clandestine groups in an unsuccessful campaign to remove Maduro and restore what it sees as Venezuela's stolen democracy.

But in March, U.S. officials traveled to Venezuela's capital, Caracas, to meet with Maduro after Russia's invasion of Ukraine upended the world order and forced Washington to rethink its national security priorities.

After the meeting, Maduro freed two American prisoners and promised to resume negotiations with his opponents.

Venezuela Vice President Delcy Rodríguez on Tuesday tweeted that the South American country hopes the decisions by the U.S. will "pave the way for the absolute lifting of the illegal sanctions that affect all of our people."

The senior U.S. officials said the government will calibrate sanctions based on concrete outcomes at the negotiations and would reimpose them in the event of backsliding in the dialogue process.

"What you are seeing here is a very honed approach that is looking at a clear roadmap in Venezuela, where the only path that the regime has toward the alleviation of sanctions from the United States is a negotiation that leads to concrete outcomes," one of the officials told reporters.

Yet, in a sign of the opposition's longstanding internal disagreements, the Unitary Platform put out a statement Tuesday to "categorically" deny the group had "requested the elimination of personal sanctions as part of the negotiation" process. It was then followed by a separate statement from the group's

delegation in the dialogue process that made no mention of the economic sanctions but said it had begun “formal conversations” with its counterpart to try to resume negotiations soon.

Maduro’s chief negotiator and leader of the National Assembly, Jorge Rodríguez, and Gerardo Blyde, who has led the opposition’s delegation in Mexico City, tweeted the same picture of themselves together with a message alluding to a working meeting.

Malpica-Flores was once national treasurer and PDVSA's vice president of finance. He was individually sanctioned in 2017 as the U.S. targeted people associated with Venezuela's rampant government corruption.

His aunt, Cilia Flores, is one of the most influential members of Venezuela’s government and a constant presence alongside her husband. Two other nephews of hers are imprisoned in the U.S. on drug conspiracy convictions.

More than a dozen Democrats this month sent Biden a letter urging him to consider lifting broad economic sanctions. After the March gathering in Caracas, Democratic Rep. Gregory Meeks, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, also spoke in favor of suspending oil sanctions to provide support for negotiations without letting up pressure on human rights abusers and corrupt officials.

Others, however, quickly criticized the administration after Tuesday's announcement, including Sen. Bob Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The Democrat in a statement said the strategy of giving Maduro “a handful of undeserved handouts” so that he promises to negotiate with the opposition “is a strategy destined to fail.”

“Removing Flores from the list of sanctioned people is obviously a gift to Maduro,” Menendez later told reporters.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Japan rising prices: economy contracts
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/japans-quarterly-economy-contracts-energy-prices-soar-84797304
GIST	<p>TOKYO -- Japan’s economy shrank at a worse than expected annual rate of 1% in the first quarter, as rising prices and COVID-19 restrictions sapped spending and investment, according to data released Wednesday.</p> <p>Japan’s real gross domestic product, or GDP, the sum of the value of a nation’s products and services, contracted 0.2% in January-March compared to the previous quarter, the Cabinet Office said.</p> <p>The world’s third-largest economy managed modest growth in the final quarter of last year, but the economy sank the quarter before that.</p> <p>Russia’s war in Ukraine has pushed already high energy prices still higher, a big minus for resource-poor Japan. The Japanese yen has weakened, trading at about 130 yen to the dollar, making imports relatively more expensive.</p> <p>Japan never had a lockdown but has periodically put restrictions on businesses, mostly asking restaurants and bars to close early to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. The last such restrictions ended in March.</p> <p>Some medical experts say the nation has seen a surge in COVID-19 cases since then, because of the more contagious omicron variant. Japan has recorded about 30,000 COVID-19-related deaths so far.</p> <p>The reintroduction of restrictions to curb the spread of the infections and the impact of inflation putting a squeeze on household spending power are pulling growth downward, analysts say.</p>

	<p>But some expect an economic rebound in months ahead.</p> <p>“After a dismal start to the year, we think the economy will bounce back this quarter thanks to a recovery in consumer spending, particularly in services, following the full lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in Japan,” said Takayuki Toji, an economist at SuMi TRUST.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Wildfire explodes: largest in NM history
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/mexico-battling-historic-blaze-hermits-peak-calf-canyon/story?id=84781122
GIST	<p>A massive wildfire currently burning east of Santa Fe, New Mexico, is now the largest in the state's history as thousands of firefighters continue to battle the blaze.</p> <p>The Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon fire -- made up of two fires that merged into one giant blaze last month -- has burned 299,565 acres, state fire officials said Tuesday.</p> <p>It officially surpassed the Whitewater-Baldy Fire as the largest fire in New Mexico's history on Monday. That fire, which was caused by lightning and also consisted of two separate fires that merged, had burned 297,845 acres primarily in the Gila National Forest before being contained in late July 2012.</p> <p>The Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon fire, the largest active fire in the U.S., was only 26% contained as of Tuesday morning, with more than 2,090 fire personnel responding. The Hermits Peak fire was caused by spot fires from a prescribed burn, while the cause of the Calf Canyon fire is under investigation, according to state fire officials.</p> <p>Residents of San Miguel, Mora, Taos and Colfax counties are advised to remain on "high alert" Tuesday for evacuation updates and road closures, officials said.</p> <p>Firefighters faced unfavorable wind conditions, warming temperatures and severe dry conditions since the Hermits Peak and Calf Canyon fires ignited in early April.</p> <p>"The challenge of predicting how wildfires move, the best experts in the world on this topic still are not going to get it right," Dr. Jason Knievel, deputy director for the National Center for Atmospheric Research, told Albuquerque ABC affiliate KOAT this week.</p> <p>There is a mix of conifer trees, ponderosa pine, brush and grass where the fire is now -- and "critically dry fuels" may increase fire activity, fire officials warned Tuesday. The fire is burning near an area with steep terrain, which can also help spread the fire, according to Knievel.</p> <p>"Fire tends to move uphill," he said.</p> <p>New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham declared a state of emergency in several counties last month as multiple wildfires burned, including the Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon fire.</p> <p>President Joe Biden called Grisham Tuesday to discuss the historic wildfire.</p> <p>“The President reaffirmed that the people of New Mexico will have the full support of the federal government, and that every effort will be made to provide immediate help to people in the impacted communities and support the State throughout its recovery,” according to a readout of the call. "The President expressed his gratitude to all of the first responders, firefighters, and other federal, state, and local personnel who are battling the blazes and have come to the aid of those who have been impacted by the fires."</p> <p>Biden approved a disaster declaration earlier this month for New Mexico that brings financial resources to the areas battling the fires.</p>

	Thousands of residents have been forced to evacuate and hundreds of structures have been destroyed due to the recent wildfire activity, the governor noted in a letter to Biden last week requesting additional aid.
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HEADLINE	05/17 WHO: China 'zero Covid' unsustainable
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/covid-health-china-pandemics-united-nations-c2b99ca8ce5f99f0d2b60aa6dcb8c2d5
GIST	<p>GENEVA (AP) — The head of the World Health Organization said China's extreme approach to containing the coronavirus is unsustainable because of the highly infectious nature of the omicron variant, but that it's up to every country to decide what policy to pursue.</p> <p>At a media briefing on Tuesday, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus described China's "zero-COVID" strategy as "not sustainable" after similar remarks last week drew sharp criticism from China.</p> <p>"We know the virus better and we have better tools, including vaccines, so that's why the handling of the virus should actually be different from what we used to do at the start of the pandemic," Tedros said. He added that the virus had changed significantly since it was first identified in Wuhan in late 2019, when China largely stopped its spread with lockdowns.</p> <p>Tedros said the WHO had repeatedly advised Chinese officials about their recommended COVID containment strategies, but that "regarding their choice of policies, it is up to every country to make that choice."</p> <p>The ruthless and often chaotic implementation of zero-COVID in China has stirred considerable resentment and food shortages in Shanghai, where some residents have been under lockdown for six weeks.</p> <p>WHO emergencies chief Dr. Michael Ryan said the agency recognized that China had faced a difficult situation with COVID-19 recently and commended authorities for keeping the number of deaths to a very low level.</p> <p>"We understand why the initial response of China was to try and suppress infections to the maximum level (but) that strategy is not sustainable and other elements of the strategic response needs to be amplified," he said. Ryan added that vaccination efforts should continue and emphasized that "a suppression-only strategy is not a sustainable way to exit the pandemic for any country."</p> <p>WHO chief Tedros also said the agency was trying to persuade North Korea and Eritrea to begin COVID-19 vaccination.</p> <p>"WHO is deeply concerned at the risk of further spread in (North Korea)," Tedros said, noting that the population is unvaccinated and there are worrying numbers of people with underlying conditions that put them at risk of severe disease.</p> <p>Tedros said the WHO has asked North Korea to share more data about the outbreak there but has so far had no response. North Korea only acknowledged an outbreak for the first time last week, and now says more than 1.7 million people have become ill with fever. It doesn't have enough testing supplies to confirm large numbers of COVID-19 cases, but outside experts believe most of the fever cases are caused by the coronavirus.</p> <p>He said the WHO had offered to send both North Korea and Eritrea vaccines, medicines, tests and technical support, but that neither country's leader has yet responded.</p>

	Ryan said any unchecked transmission in countries like North Korea and Eritrea could spur the emergence of new variants, but that the WHO was powerless to act unless countries accepted its help.
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HEADLINE	05/17 UN envoy: Iraq 'streets about to boil over'
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-government-and-politics-united-nations-iraq-f7c2c38fcad210eda74c1f5a4dc8a130
GIST	<p>UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. special envoy for Iraq warned its political leaders Tuesday that “the streets are about to boil over” because of their deadlock and failure to address a host of issues, including the suffering of ordinary people and armed groups firing rockets with impunity.</p> <p>Jeannine Hennis-Plasschaert told several reporters after briefing the U.N. Security Council that Iraq and the region cannot afford to go back to October 2019.</p> <p>That is when young men and women fed up with an Iraqi political elite they blamed for many grievances launched mass demonstrations that were met with bullets, water cannons and tear gas that plunged the country into renewed instability just as it was starting to emerge from war against the Islamic State extremist group.</p> <p>In her briefing to the council, Hennis-Plasschaert warned that “notorious aspects of Iraqi political life are repeating themselves in a seemingly incessant loop of zero-sum politics.”</p> <p>More than seven months after parliamentary elections, she said, “multiple deadlines for the formation of a government have been missed.”</p> <p>In late March, powerful Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose political bloc won the most seats, announced he was stepping back for 40 days to give his Iran-backed rivals a chance to form the next government. But there is still no agreement on a government.</p> <p>Hennis-Plasschaert warned Iraq’s political leaders not to hide behind the argument that a government hasn’t been formed, which she said “distracts from what is at stake.”</p> <p>It not only excuses a political deadlock while armed groups “fire rockets with apparent freedom and impunity” and ordinary people suffer, she said, but “it excuses a political impasse while simmering public anger can boil over at any moment.”</p> <p>Hennis-Plasschaert said political leaders support dialogue or another round of negotiations. “But the willingness to compromise? It is painfully absent,” she said.</p> <p>“Visit any market and Iraqis will tell you: the national interest is, yet again, taking a back seat to short-sighted considerations of control over resources and power play,” she said.</p> <p>Hennis-Plasschaert said it is time to return the spotlight to the Iraqi people who are demanding adequate services for all people.</p> <p>They also want, she said, “an end to pervasive corruption, factionalism and the pillaging of state institutions,” a diversification of the economy, an end to impunity, the reining in of armed groups and “predictable governance instead of constant crisis management.”</p> <p>She was sharply critical of “the sorry pattern of ad-hoc negotiations” between the central government and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region, saying an institutionalized “mechanism” is critically needed to solve all outstanding issues, including the recent Iraqi Federal Supreme Court ruling that the Kurdistan region’s 2007 oil and gas law on production, revenues and exports is unconstitutional.</p> <p>“Having engaged with both sides on this matter, I am convinced that there is a way out,” she said.</p>

	<p>Hennis-Plasschaert called incoming missiles and rockets “disturbing, disruptive and dangerous,” pointing to Turkish and Iranian shelling activities in northern Iran and armed groups outside government control recklessly firing rockets, including at an oil refinery in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region, some two weeks ago.</p> <p>Discussing Sinjar, the region where U.N. investigators say Islamic State extremists committed genocide against the Yazidi minority in 2014, Hennis-Plasschaert said the area “has increasingly turned into an arena for external and domestic spoilers”</p> <p>Clashes in recent weeks have made Sinjar families again pack their belongings and go back to Kurdistan to seek shelter, she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Turkey wary of Nordic states’ NATO bid
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/turkey-nato-membership-sweden-finalnd-83a191ca8b4052925059b61ddd7e0945
GIST	<p>ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has thrown a spanner in the works of Sweden and Finland’s historic decisions to seek NATO membership, declaring that he cannot allow them to join due to their alleged support of Kurdish militants and other groups that Ankara says threaten its national security.</p> <p>NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has voiced confidence that the alliance will move to admit Sweden and Finland swiftly. But Erdogan’s declaration suggests that the two Nordic countries’ path to membership could be anything but smooth.</p> <p>Turkey’s approval is crucial because the military alliance makes its decisions by consensus. Any of its 30 member countries can veto a new member.</p> <p>Erdogan’s government is expected to use the two countries’ membership bids as leverage for concessions and guarantees from its allies.</p> <p>Here’s a look at Turkey’s position, what it could gain and likely repercussions:</p> <p>WHAT’S TURKEY’S PROBLEM WITH THE MEMBERSHIP BIDS?</p> <p>Turkey, which has NATO’s second largest army, has traditionally been supportive of NATO enlargement, believing that the alliance’s “open door” policy enhances European security. It has for example, spoken in favor of the prospect of Ukraine and Georgia joining.</p> <p>Erdogan’s objection to Sweden and Finland stems from Turkish grievances with Stockholm’s — and to a lesser degree Helsinki’s — perceived support of the banned Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, the leftist extremist group DHKP-C and followers of the U.S.-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen who Ankara claims was behind a failed military coup attempt in 2016.</p> <p>Many Kurdish and other exiles have found refuge in Sweden over the past decades, as have members of Gulen’s movement more recently. According to Turkey’s state-run media, Sweden and Finland have refused to extradite 33 people wanted by Turkey.</p> <p>Ankara, which frequently accuses allies of turning a blind eye to its security concerns, has also been angered by restrictions on sales of military equipment to Turkey. These were imposed by EU countries, including Sweden and Finland, following Turkey’s military incursion into northern Syria in 2019.</p> <p>Further justifying his objection, Erdogan says his country doesn’t want to repeat a “mistake” by Ankara, which agreed to readmit Greece into NATO’s military structure in 1980. He claimed the action had allowed Greece “to take an attitude against Turkey” with NATO’s backing.</p>

WHAT COULD TURKEY GAIN?

Turkey is expected to seek to negotiate a compromise deal under which the two countries will crack down on the PKK and other groups in return for Turkish support of their joining NATO. A key demand is expected to be that they halt any support to a Syrian Kurdish group, the Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG. The group is a Western ally in the fight against the Islamic State group in northern Syria but Turkey views it as an extension of the PKK.

Erdogan could also seek to use Sweden and Finland's membership to wrest concessions from the United States and other allies. Turkey wants to return to the U.S.-led F-35 fighter jet program — a project it was kicked out of following its purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems. Alternatively, Turkey is looking to purchase a new batch of F-16 fighter jets and upgrade its existing fleet.

Other possible demands could include an end to an unofficial embargo on military sales to Turkey by allies; concessions from EU member countries concerning Turkey's faltered bid to join the bloc; and increased funds to help the country support 3.7 million Syrian refugees.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT TURKEY'S IMAGE IN THE WEST?

Turkey's threat of a veto is likely to undermine its own status in Washington and across NATO, reinforcing an image of a country that is blocking the alliance's expansion for its own profit. With the move, Turkey also risks damaging the credit it had earned by supplying Ukraine with the Bayraktar TB2 armed drones that became an effective weapon against Russian forces.

"There is no scenario under which Turkey does not end up being seen as (Russian President Vladimir) Putin's mole inside NATO," said Soner Cagaptay, an expert on Turkey at the Washington Institute. "Everybody will forget the objections linked to the PKK. Everybody will focus on the fact that Turkey is blocking NATO's expansion. It will distort the view of Turkey across (NATO)."

Cagaptay said Turkey's obstruction could also undo "the positive momentum" that had started to build in Washington regarding the sale of the F-16s. "I cannot see that sale going through at this stage," he said.

IS TURKEY TRYING TO APPEASE RUSSIA?

Turkey has built close relations with both Russia and Ukraine and has been trying to balance its ties with both. It has refused to join sanctions against Russia — while supporting Ukraine with the drones that helped deny Russia air superiority.

"The fact that Erdogan is derailing (the NATO) process intentionally suggests that maybe he is trying to balance the strong military support Turkey has given to Kyiv with political support to Russia," Cagaptay said.

A top Turkish politician has also expressed concerns that Finland and Sweden's membership could provoke Russia and inflame the war in Ukraine. Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of a nationalist party allied with Erdogan, said the best option would be to keep the two Nordic countries in the "waiting room."

CAN THE MOVE HELP ERDOGAN'S RATINGS AT HOME?

The Turkish leader is seeing a decline in his domestic support due to a faltering economy, skyrocketing inflation and a cost of living crisis.

A standoff with Western nations over the emotional issue of perceived support to the PKK could help Erdogan boost his support and rally the nationalist vote before elections that are currently scheduled for June 2023.

	“With dwindling domestic support at a time when Turkey is entering a critical electoral cycle, Erdogan is looking for a higher international profile to demonstrate his global importance to Turkish voters,” analyst Asli Aydintasbas wrote in an article published in the European Council on Foreign Relations.
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HEADLINE	05/17 Will Turkey upend NATO expansion?
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-government-and-politics-diplomacy-turkey-middle-east-8054f4329867deea4d63cef87e2bd406
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — With Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan taking an increasingly tough line against the NATO membership bids of Finland and Sweden despite far less strident statements from some of his top aides, U.S. officials are trying to determine how serious the often mercurial leader is and what it might take to get him to back down.</p> <p>Amid the contradictory signals from Ankara over the expected applications, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet his Turkish counterpart on Wednesday in New York in a new effort to clarify Ankara’s position after previous attempts appear to have only clouded the situation.</p> <p>Underscoring the sensitivity of the delicate diplomacy required to deal with a potentially recalcitrant ally, the Biden administration seems to have taken to ignoring Erdogan saying he cannot allow the two nations to join NATO due to their alleged support for groups Turkey sees as security threats. Instead, the administration is focusing on remarks made in closed-door meetings by lower-ranking Turkish officials.</p> <p>“It is not for us to speak for the Turkish government,” State Department spokesman Ned Price said repeatedly on Tuesday in response to multiple questions about what the U.S. understands Turkey’s position to be and whether Turkey had demanded anything from the United States in return for agreeing to Finland’s and Sweden’s memberships.</p> <p>At stake for the United States and its NATO partners is an opportunity to respond to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine by strengthening and expanding the alliance — the very opposite of what President Vladimir Putin hoped to achieve in starting the war.</p> <p>But Erdogan’s suggestions that he could derail Sweden’s and Finland’s membership hopes also highlight a potential weakness that Putin has tried to exploit in the past — the unwieldy nature of the consensus-run alliance where a single member can block actions supported by the other 29.</p> <p>Initially seen in Washington and other NATO capitals as an easily resolved minor distraction to the process of enlarging the alliance in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Erdogan’s verbal volleys toward Finland and Sweden are attracting more concern as the two Nordic nations move ever closer to submitting formal applications with the hope of joining as quickly as possible.</p> <p>Even if they are overcome, objections from Turkey, which is the only one of NATO’s 30 members to have raised reservations about the expansion so far, could delay Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to the alliance for months, particularly if other nations follow suit in seeking concessions for their votes.</p> <p>Erdogan, who has grown increasingly authoritarian over the years, is known to be an unpredictable leader and there have been occasions when his words have been at clear odds with what Turkish diplomats or other senior officials in his government have said.</p> <p>“I don’t exclude a possible disconnect between Turkish diplomats and Erdogan. In the past there have been examples of such disconnect,” said Barcin Yinan, a journalist and commentator on Turkish foreign policy. She said there was a “disconnect” between Erdogan and the Foreign Ministry last year, when the Turkish leader threatened to expel 10 Western diplomats, including the U.S. ambassador, whom he accused of meddling in Turkey’s judiciary.</p>

For instance, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told reporters in Berlin on Sunday after discussions with Turkish officials that “Turkey has made it clear that their intention is not to block membership.” Meanwhile, Blinken and other foreign ministers, including Germany’s top diplomat, Annalena Baerbock, expressed absolute confidence that all NATO members, including Turkey, would welcome the two newcomers.

Yet on Monday, Erdogan surprised many by doubling down on his criticism of Finland and Sweden, accusing them of supporting Kurdish militants and others whom Turkey considers to be terrorists and of imposing restrictions on military sales to Turkey.

“Neither country has an open, clear stance against terrorist organizations,” Erdogan said. “We cannot say ‘yes’ to those who impose sanctions on Turkey, on joining NATO, which is a security organization.”

Asked about the disparity, Price, the State Department spokesman, would say only that Blinken, after meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavuoglu and others over the weekend, “came away with the same sense of confidence that there was strong consensus for admitting Finland and Sweden into the alliance if they choose to join, and we’re confident we’ll be able to preserve that consensus.”

Gonul Tol, director of the Turkey program at the Middle East Institute, said that while Erdogan often talks a tough line, he tends to come around in the end and do the “rational” thing.

“Erdogan is unpredictable. But at the same time, he’s a very pragmatic actor,” she said. Tol said Erdogan likes to negotiate and pushes for “maximalist demands” during the negotiations. “He ends up settling for much less than that,” she said.

She noted that Erdogan’s grievances with Western countries over the Kurds are not new and that strains between Turkey and the United States over military supplies are long-standing.

Having been dropped from the F-35 advanced fighter jet development program after buying a Russian air defense system, Turkey has been pressing the U.S. to sell it new F-16 fighters or at the very least refurbish its existing fleet. Discussions on both issues are taking place in Washington this week and some officials believe that while they are unrelated to the NATO enlargement question, resolutions to either could help persuade Erdogan to drop his objections.

Tol agreed and said: “This is happening at a time when he’s trying to mend ties with Washington, when Turkey is involved in negotiations to convince Congress to sell F-16s to Turkey. This is a time when Erdogan is trying to burnish his image as a valuable ally. And this is a time when the invasion of Ukraine has given him an opportunity to reach out to Western capitals. So against that background it would be a very dramatic step if Turkey in fact vetoes the application of Finland and Sweden.”

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HEADLINE	05/18 NKorea reports another spike Covid cases
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/n-korea-reports-another-jump-in-suspected-covid-19-cases/
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea on Wednesday reported 232,880 new cases of fever and another six deaths as leader Kim Jong Un accused officials of “immaturity” and “slackness” in their early handling of the COVID-19 outbreak ravaging across the unvaccinated nation.</p> <p>The country’s anti-virus headquarters said 62 people have died and more than 1.7 million have fallen ill amid a rapid spread of fever since late April. It said more than a million people recovered but at least 691,170 remain in quarantine.</p> <p>Outside experts say most of the illnesses would be COVID-19, although North Korea has been able to confirm only a small number of COVID-19 cases since acknowledging an omicron outbreak last week, likely because of insufficient testing capabilities.</p>

A failure to control the outbreak could have dire consequences in North Korea, considering its broken health care system and its rejection of internationally offered vaccines that has left a population of 26 million unimmunized.

The outbreak is almost certainly greater than the fever tally, considering the lack of tests and resources to monitor the sick, and there's also suspicion that North Korea is underreporting deaths to soften the blow for Kim, who already was navigating the toughest moment of his decade in power. The pandemic has further damaged an economy already broken by mismanagement and U.S.-led sanctions over Kim's nuclear weapons and missiles development.

The North's official Korean Central News Agency said Kim during a ruling party Politburo meeting on Tuesday criticized officials over their early pandemic response, which he said underscored "immaturity in the state capacity for coping with the crisis" and blamed the vulnerability on their "non-positive attitude, slackness and non-activity."

He urged officials to strengthen virus controls at workplaces and make "redoubled efforts" to improve the supply of daily necessities and stabilize living conditions, the KCNA said Wednesday.

Kim's comments came days after he ripped officials over how they were handling the distribution of medicine released from state reserves and mobilized his army to help transport the supplies to pharmacies in capital Pyongyang, which were made open 24 hours to deal with the crisis..

KCNA said nearly 3,000 members of the Korean People's Army's medical units were helping the delivery of medicine to pharmacies, while more than 1.4 million officials, teachers and students in public health sectors were being deployed for checkups aimed at identifying people with symptoms so they could be quarantined.

Lacking public health tools like vaccines, antiviral pills and intensive care units that lowered hospitalizations and deaths in other nations, North Korea has been relying on finding people with symptoms and isolating them at shelters.

While raising alarm over the outbreak, Kim has also stressed that his economic goals should be met. State media reports show large groups of workers are continuing to gather at farms, mining facilities, power stations and construction sites, being driven to ensure their works are "propelled as scheduled."

Before acknowledging COVID-19 infections last Thursday, North Korea had insisted of a perfect record in keeping out the virus that has reached nearly every corner of the world, a claim that was widely doubted. But its extremely strict border closure, large-scale quarantines and propaganda that stressed anti-virus controls as a matter of "national existence" may have staved off a huge outbreak until now.

It's unclear whether the North's admission of a COVID-19 outbreak communicates a willingness to accept outside help. Kim's government had shunned millions of vaccine shots offered by the U.N.-backed COVAX distribution program, likely because of international monitoring requirements attached to them.

North Korea and Eritrea are the only sovereign U.N.-member countries not to have rolled out vaccines. World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a briefing Tuesday that the agency has offered to send both countries vaccines, medicines, tests and technical support, but that neither country's leader has yet responded.

"WHO is deeply concerned at the risk of further spread in (North Korea)," Tedros said, also noting the country has worrying numbers of people with underlying conditions that put them at risk of severe disease.

WHO emergencies chief Dr. Michael Ryan said any unchecked transmission in countries like North Korea and Eritrea could spur the emergence of new variants, but that the WHO was powerless to act unless countries accepted its help.

The North has so far ignored rival South Korea's offer to provide vaccines, medicine and health personnel, but experts say the North may be more willing to accept help from its main ally China. South Korea's government said it couldn't confirm media reports that North Korea flew multiple planes to bring back emergency supplies from China on Tuesday.

North Korean officials during Tuesday's meeting continued to express confidence that the country could overcome the crisis on its own, with the Politburo members discussing ways for "continuously maintaining the good chance in the overall epidemic prevention front," KCNA said.

While Kim was seen wearing masks for the first time following North Korea's admission of COVID-19 infections last week, state media photos of Tuesday's meeting showed Kim and Politburo members engaging in discussions barefaced, in a possible expression of confidence.

North Korea's COVID-19 outbreak came amid a provocative run in weapons demonstrations, including its first test of an intercontinental ballistic missile in nearly five years, in a brinkmanship aimed at forcing the United States to accept the idea of the North as a nuclear power and negotiate economic and security concessions from a position of strength.

There are also signs that the North is restoring a nuclear testing ground that was last active in 2017 in possible preparations to resume nuclear explosive tests, which U.S. and South Korean officials say could happen as early as this month.

Recent commercial satellite images of the testing ground in Punggye-ri indicate refurbishment work and preparations at a yet unused tunnel on the southern part of the site, which is presumably nearing completion to host a nuclear test, according to an analysis released Tuesday by Beyond Parallel, a website run by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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HEADLINE	05/17 NHTSA: highest number killed in 16yrs
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/nearly-43000-people-died-on-us-roads-last-year-agency-says/
GIST	<p>DETROIT (AP) — Nearly 43,000 people were killed on U.S. roads last year, the highest number in 16 years as Americans returned to the roads after the coronavirus pandemic forced many to stay at home.</p> <p>The 10.5% jump over 2020 numbers was the largest percentage increase since the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration began its fatality data collection system in 1975. Exacerbating the problem was a persistence of risky driving behaviors during the pandemic, such as speeding and less frequent use of seat belts, as people began to venture out more in 2021 for out-of-state and other road trips, analysts said.</p> <p>Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said America faces a crisis on its roads. The safety administration urged state and local governments, drivers and safety advocates to join in an effort to reverse the rising death trend.</p> <p>“Our nation has taken a dangerous and deadly step backwards in traffic safety and impaired driving,” said MADD National President Alex Otte, who urged strong public-private efforts akin to the seat belt and air bag public safety campaigns of the 1990s to stem reckless driving. “More families and more communities are feeling the crushing magnitude of this crisis on our roads.”</p> <p>Preliminary figures released Tuesday by the agency show that 42,915 people died in traffic crashes last year, up from 38,824 in 2020. Final figures will be released in the fall.</p> <p>Forty-four states as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico had increases in traffic deaths in 2021 compared to the previous year, led by Texas, California and Florida. Posting declines were Wyoming, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Maryland and Maine. Rhode Island's figures were unchanged.</p>

Americans drove about 325 billion more miles last year, 11.2% higher than in 2020, which contributed to the increase.

Nearly 118 people died in U.S. traffic crashes every day last year, according to the agency's figures. The Governors Highway Safety Association, a group of state traffic safety officials, blamed the increase on dangerous behavior such as speeding, driving while impaired by alcohol and drugs, and distracted driving, as well as "roads designed for speed instead of safety."

The combination, the group said, "has wiped out a decade and a half of progress in reducing traffic crashes, injuries and deaths."

Deaths last year increased in almost all types of crashes, NHTSA reported. Crashes occurring during out of state travel jumped 15%, compared to 2020, many of them on rural interstate roads or access roads off city highways. Fatalities in urban areas and deaths in multi-vehicle crashes each rose 16%. Pedestrian deaths were up 13%.

By age, fatalities among drivers 65 and older rose 14%, reversing a declining trend seen among them in 2020. Deaths also surged among middle-aged drivers, led by those 35-to-44, which rose 15%. Kids under age 16 saw traffic fatalities increase 6%.

By vehicle, fatalities involving at least one big truck were up 13%, while motorcycle deaths were up 9% and deaths of bicyclists rose 5%. Fatalities involving speeding drivers and deaths in alcohol-related crashes each were up 5%.

Government estimates show the rate of road deaths declined slightly from 2020. Last year there were 1.33 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, compared with 1.34 in 2020. The fatality rate rose in the first quarter of last year, but declined the rest of the year, NHTSA said.

Traffic deaths began to spike in 2020. NHTSA has blamed reckless driving behavior for increases during the pandemic, citing behavioral research showing that speeding and traveling without a seat belt have been higher. Before 2020, the number of fatalities had fallen for three straight years.

Deputy NHTSA Administrator Steven Cliff, the Biden administration's nominee to run the agency, said the roadway crisis is urgent and preventable. "We will redouble our safety efforts, and we need everyone — state and local governments, safety advocates, automakers and drivers, to join us," Cliff said in a statement. "All of our lives depend on it."

Buttigieg pointed to a national strategy unveiled earlier this year aimed at reversing the trend. He said earlier that over the next two years his department will provide federal guidance as well as billions in grants under President Joe Biden's new infrastructure law to spur states and localities to lower speed limits and embrace safer road design such as dedicated bike and bus lanes, better lighting and crosswalks. The strategy also urges the use of speed cameras, which the department says could provide more equitable enforcement than police traffic stops.

In Tuesday's statement, the department said it opened up its first round of applications for the program, which will spend up to \$6 billion over five years on local efforts to cut crashes and deaths.

The Transportation Department is moving in the right direction to stem the increase in deaths, but it will take years for many of the steps to work, said Michael Brooks, acting executive director of the nonprofit Center for Auto Safety.

NHTSA, for instance, has regulations pending to require electronic automatic emergency braking and pedestrian detection systems on all new light vehicles, and to require automatic emergency braking on heavy trucks, he said. Automatic emergency braking can slow or stop a vehicle if there's an object in its path.

	<p>The agency also is requiring automakers to install systems that alert rear-seat passengers if their safety belts aren't buckled.</p> <p>"Responding to this is difficult," Brooks said. "It takes a lot of work on a lot of different strategies to address these issues. They've got a lot of work on their hands."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 King Co. closing 3 Covid testing sites
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/king-county-to-close-3-covid-testing-sites/
GIST	<p>Citing low demand and the widespread availability of both PCR and at-home tests, Public Health – Seattle & King County will close its Tukwila, Federal Way and Auburn COVID-19 testing sites.</p> <p>With waning federal funding two years into the pandemic, the agency said it is planning to transition away from emergency response and toward long-term prevention by working with community partners to add more COVID-related services and precautions — like improving air ventilation — into their operations.</p> <p>In recent weeks, the number of King County residents taking PCR tests has decreased. During the omicron wave between mid-January and early February, King County was reporting a seven-day average of 10,000 and 16,000 tests a day. That number has now dropped to between 2,600 and 6,000 tests.</p> <p>According to health department spokesperson Kate Cole, in mid-January, the Auburn site saw a daily average of 1,300 tests. Federal Way averaged 682 tests daily and Tukwila averaged 660. As of April 25, there are an average of 174 tests administered daily at the Auburn site, 174 at the Federal Way site and 135 at the Tukwila site, she said.</p> <p>The Federal Way and Tukwila sites will have their last day of operations on May 27, and the Auburn site will close after June 1. At its height, Public Health – Seattle & King County operated seven drive-thru testing sites and one walk-up site. After these three closures, the site in Renton will be the only county-operated testing location.</p> <p>The public health department said it is working with health care partners to expand long-term testing operations in South King County, which may include reopening existing test sites or opening new locations.</p> <p>"We look forward to announcing more information in the coming weeks," the agency said in a news release.</p> <p>Where to get tested</p> <p>A list of testing sites in King County is available at st.news/kingcounty/testing.</p> <p>Public Health – Seattle & King County is still operating a drive-thru site with Health Point six days a week in Renton at 805 S.W. 10th St.</p> <p>In Seattle, UW Medicine has sites available throughout the city here: uwmedicine.org/coronavirus/testing. Additional sites are also available through The Polyclinic and Curative.</p> <p>How to order free rapid tests</p> <p>Rapid tests are also still available through the federal government and can be ordered through covidtests.gov. Rapid tests can also be ordered monthly through the Washington Department of Health at sayyescovidhometest.org.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Gender gap Seattle tech not much changed
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SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/from-2010-to-2020-gender-gap-in-seattle-tech-stayed-largely-the-same/
GIST	<p>It's safe to say the "Seattle tech bro" stereotype won't be dying anytime soon.</p> <p>That's because, when it comes to the gender gap in Seattle's tech jobs, not much has changed in the past decade.</p> <p>Of course, this disparity in tech occupations is not unique to our city. But Seattle's tech gender gap is wider than the national average.</p> <p>New census data shows that the share of tech workers in Seattle who are male was almost exactly the same in 2020 as it was at the start of the decade.</p> <p>Back in 2010, there were around 20,500 computer and mathematical workers living in the city. Men made up nearly 16,000 of them — that's 77.4%.</p> <p>The number of workers in these occupations ballooned to more than 50,000 by 2020. But the percentage who are men stayed almost exactly the same, at 77.9% (roughly 39,000 of the 50,000 workers).</p> <p>Census data shows that nationally, men represented 72.7% of workers in computer and mathematical jobs in 2020. The census does not count nonbinary people and only asks if respondents are male or female.</p> <p>While it's well known that tech occupations are dominated by men, I was surprised that the gender gap hasn't narrowed at all in Seattle over the past decade. After all, the tech field has come under greater scrutiny for its lack of female representation, and there have been efforts to bring more women into tech. For example, the ADA Developers Academy, a tuition-free program for women, was founded in Seattle in 2013.</p> <p>The No. 1 occupation in Seattle is software developer. According to the most recent available data, the gender gap was even greater among people in this role than those in most other tech jobs. Around 86% of developers who live in Seattle were men. But computer programmers skewed even slightly more male, at 87%.</p> <p>The tech occupations that were least skewed toward men in Seattle were computer scientists/systems analysts/web developers (these titles all fall under one category in the census data). Even so, these jobs were still predominantly held by men, at 66.5%.</p> <p>Early gender socialization, cultural perceptions that technology is a male arena and unwelcoming, and sexist environments at some companies are among the reasons commonly cited as why women are underrepresented in tech.</p> <p>Disparities are more stark when you consider other identities along with gender. For example, if you look at race and gender, white and Asian women make up more than 90% of the roughly 11,000 female tech workers who live in Seattle. Census estimates show only about 500 Black and Hispanic women living in Seattle work in tech. Seattle's male tech workers are slightly more racially diverse, though white and Asian men make up a similarly large share of that population (88%).</p> <p>When looking at disparities in the workplace, it's likely pay comes to mind. The median income for a Seattle woman who works in a computer and mathematical occupation full-time, year-round was about \$103,000. That's significantly lower than median for a Seattle man, which was around \$133,000. Some of that gap is likely due to the fact that men are so dominant in the software developer field, which is among the most well-compensated.</p> <p>Concern over the gender gap in tech jobs is largely due to the importance of the technology sector, and the profound impact technology has on our lives. But there are similar — or even larger — gender gaps in many other occupations that receive much less attention.</p>

	<p>In fact, gender gaps are common in many fields. My analysis of census data shows that in three-quarters of the top occupations in Seattle (those with at least 500 workers who live in the city), either men or women made up 60% or more of the workforce.</p> <p>Two tech jobs that I mentioned previously — computer programmers and software developers — landed in the top 15 for occupations most skewed toward men among Seattle residents. But a bunch of other jobs had even bigger gender gaps.</p> <p>Among these jobs, two were entirely dominated by one gender in Seattle: Occupational therapists were all women and auto mechanics were all men, according to census estimates.</p> <p>The second-largest gender gap in Seattle was among personal-appearance workers, a category largely made up of people who work in nail salons — about 97% were women. The third-largest gap was among construction laborers, who were 96% men.</p> <p>That said, there are also some jobs that have near gender parity in Seattle.</p> <p>There are three that come close to a 50/50 split between men and women: technical writers, retail salespeople and restaurant hosts.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 China Eastern Air crash intentional?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/china-eastern-plane-crash-data-suggest-intentional-dive-wsj-says/
GIST	<p>The black box for a China Eastern Airlines jet that crashed earlier this year suggests the Boeing plane took an intentional nosedive, The Wall Street Journal said.</p> <p>Data recovered from the black box suggests that someone in the cockpit input controls that sent the plane into its deadly descent, the Journal reported, citing people familiar with U.S. officials' preliminary assessment of the incident.</p> <p>The Boeing 737-800 jetliner was en route from Kunming to Guangzhou on March 21 when it plummeted from the sky, killing all 132 passengers and crew. U.S. officials involved in the investigation have focused on the actions of a pilot, though it's possible someone else on the plane could have broken into the cockpit and caused the crash, the Journal reported, citing people familiar with the matter.</p> <p>Boeing shares added to their gains for the day, climbing as much as 6.2% in New York. If the report is correct, it would indicate the airplane maker doesn't bear primary responsibility for the crash.</p> <p>The Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Emergency orders done? 29 still in effect
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/politics-government/article261521882.html
GIST	<p>It's been more than two years since Gov. Jay Inslee issued his first COVID-19 emergency proclamation in the state of Washington.</p> <p>Since then, the governor has signed 87 COVID-related proclamations, rescinding 58 fully so far, while all or portions of 29 proclamations are still active statewide.</p>

In February 2020 the governor first issued proclamation 20-05, which declared that COVID-19 is a statewide emergency. Without that emergency declaration in place, the governor would not have authority for other emergency powers under the law.

Of the proclamations, one of the most debated and controversial orders is still in effect. The proclamation requires workers in state, educational and healthcare settings to be vaccinated unless those individuals have a religious exemption or have a disability that prevents them from being vaccinated.

The order was signed by the governor last August after access to vaccinations became increasingly available. The proclamation required employees to be fully vaccinated by October or lose their jobs.

Other proclamations have not been as controversial but still remain in effect.

For example, proclamation 21-08.01 protects workers against adverse action from employers for getting the COVID vaccine, taking paid or unpaid time off to get the vaccine or recover from the vaccine's side effects, taking paid or unpaid time off to quarantine after being advised by a medical professional, and protecting employees who choose to wear a face-covering at work.

Other proclamations related to temporary practice permits for healthcare workers, suspending statutory requirements between Tribes and the state so that Tribes can use fuel tax refunds, and a proclamation related to workers and resources at long-term care facilities are still in effect.

Several other emergency orders such as tenancy protections, mask mandates and "stay home" orders have all lapsed and are no longer in effect.

Not all have not agreed with the emergency proclamations set by Inslee and are still against the remaining proclamations, such as Rep. Jim Walsh, a Republican from Aberdeen who has been vocal throughout the pandemic against COVID mandates. Walsh wore a yellow Star of David last summer in protest of vaccine mandates, a move he later apologized for.

Walsh told McClatchy that he is most concerned about the underlying emergency declaration as it is the basis for other proclamations by the governor. He said the state needs to reform current laws to put a time limit on the governor's powers, and he introduced a bill during the recent session to put a 14-day limit on emergency orders. He also supported other legislation to cap the time period at 30 days.

Additionally, Walsh said he believes the proclamation that requires employees to be vaccinated is unconstitutional and should be rescinded immediately. He said he thinks Inslee should issue an executive order for state agencies to rehire employees who were fired as a result of the proclamation.

But the Governor's Office and some other state officials agree that certain proclamations are necessary for the state, as the pandemic is still ongoing.

Mike Faulk, deputy communications director and press secretary for Inslee, told McClatchy that the Governor's Office does not have any immediate plans to rescind any of the remaining orders. He said that most of the proclamations are still in effect because they've heard from stakeholders, policy analysts and other elected leaders that those proclamations are still needed "based on current conditions — whether it's the status of the virus itself or labor and supply chain issues."

"They'll be lifted when they aren't needed to help Washingtonians mitigate the ongoing disruptions of the pandemic," Faulk said.

In 2021, Senate Democrats introduced a concurrent resolution to extend certain proclamations throughout the duration of the pandemic, or until those proclamations are rescinded by the governor.

In Oregon, executive order-based health and safety requirements were lifted last year, according to Charles Boyle, deputy communications director for Gov. Kate Brown. He told McClatchy that Oregon's COVID-

19 emergency order was lifted on April 1 of this year, but that “requirements in specialized settings, such as health care facilities, remain in place under the Oregon Health Authority’s normal rule-making authority.”

Other state governors have tried to retain their emergency orders, but haven’t been as successful.

In Kentucky, for example, Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear initially vetoed legislation by the Republican-led legislature to end emergency orders, but later had his veto overridden by the majority.

There are still 14 other states with emergency orders in place including California, Texas and New York.

All of the active orders still in effect in Washington state can be found on the governor’s website.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	05/17 NSA: hackers target Zyxel vulnerability
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/researchers-nsa-cybersecurity-director-warn-of-hackers-targeting-zyxel-vulnerability/
GIST	<p>Researchers, NSA cybersecurity director warn of hackers targeting Zyxel vulnerability</p> <p>A widespread, critical vulnerability affecting Zyxel firewalls is being exploited by hackers, according to several researchers and the director of cybersecurity for the NSA.</p> <p>Cybersecurity nonprofit Shadowserver Foundation said it began seeing exploitation attempts starting on May 13. CVE-2022-30525 was first discovered by cybersecurity firm Rapid7 and the firewalls affected by the vulnerability are sold to both small companies and corporate headquarters. The tools are used for VPN solutions, SSL inspection, web filtering, intrusion protection, and email security.</p> <p>The vulnerability allows attackers to modify specific files and then execute some OS commands on a vulnerable device. It has a CVSS v3 score of 9.8 — indicating a high severity — and affects Zyxel firewalls supporting Zero Touch Provisioning (ZTP), which includes the ATP series, VPN series, and the USG FLEX series.</p> <p>Netenrich principal threat hunter John Bambenek noted that the devices tend to cater to small-to-medium businesses.</p> <p>“These organizations are most likely in no position to know there is a vulnerability, much less have an expert that they can ask to patch it,” Bambenek said.</p> <p>Bugcrowd founder Casey Ellis told The Record that while the vulnerability is fairly remedial, it does “have a propensity to turn up on networking and embedded equipment.”</p> <p>“Despite command injection being well-known and avoidable, it continues to show up and be impactful on the internet,” Ellis said. “This demonstrates the continued need for assurance and coverage of code and systems by security researchers and those who ‘think differently’ to the developers of these products, and have the ability to catch what may have been missed.”</p> <p>INSTANCES SHOWN VIA SHODAN SEARCH</p> <p>Shadowserver said it found even more systems that may be vulnerable.</p> <p>“We see at least 20 800 of the potentially affected Zyxel firewall models (by unique IP) accessible on the Internet. Most popular are USG20-VPN (10K IPs) and USG20W-VPN (5.7K IPs). Most of the CVE-2022-30525 affected models are in the EU – France (4.5K) and Italy (4.4K),” Shadowserver explained.</p> <p>Zyxel patched the vulnerability after it was discovered in April. But on Sunday morning, NSA director of cybersecurity Rob Joyce confirmed that the vulnerability was being exploited in the wild.</p>

Rapid7 also had a fair amount of criticism for how Zyxel handled the vulnerability. After notifying the company of the issue and proposing a coordinated disclosure date in June, Zyxel instead released patches to address the issue on April 28.

“Zyxel did not publish an associated CVE or security advisory. On May 9, Rapid7 independently discovered Zyxel’s uncoordinated disclosure. The vendor then reserved CVE-2022-30525. This patch release is tantamount to releasing details of the vulnerabilities, since attackers and researchers can trivially reverse the patch to learn precise exploitation details, while defenders rarely bother to do this,” the company explained.

“Therefore, we’re releasing this disclosure early in order to assist defenders in detecting exploitation and to help them decide when to apply this fix in their own environments, according to their own risk tolerances. In other words, silent vulnerability patching tends to only help active attackers, and leaves defenders in the dark about the true risk of newly discovered issues.”

In the patch document, Zyxel only said there was a “miscommunication” with Rapid7 and did not respond to requests for comment.

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HEADLINE	05/18 FBI, NSA: top-10 cyberattack mistakes
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/fbi-and-nsa-say-stop-doing-these-10-things-that-let-the-hackers-in/
GIST	<p>Cyber attackers regularly exploit unpatched software vulnerabilities, but they "routinely" target security misconfigurations for initial access, so the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and its peers have created a to-do list for defenders in today's heightened threat environment.</p> <p>CISA, the FBI and National Security Agency (NSA), as well as cybersecurity authorities from Canada, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and the UK, have compiled a list of the main weak security controls, poor configurations, and poor security practices that defenders should implement to thwart initial access. It also contains the authorities' collective recommended mitigations.</p> <p>"Cyber actors routinely exploit poor security configurations (either misconfigured or left unsecured), weak controls, and other poor cyber hygiene practices to gain initial access or as part of other tactics to compromise a victim's system," CISA says.</p> <p>The list of actions includes all obvious candidates, such as enabling multi-factor authentication (MFA) on key systems, such as virtual private networks (VPNs), but which are prone to misconfigurations when implemented in complex IT environments.</p> <p>For example, last year Russian hackers combined a default policy shared by multiple MFA solutions and a Windows printer privilege of escalation flaw to disable MFA for active domain accounts and then establish remote desktop protocol (RDP) connections to Windows domain controllers. This complexity can also be seen in the choice of, deployment and use of VPNs, whose adoption escalated after the pandemic struck.</p> <p>Recent research by Palo Alto Networks found that 99% of cloud services utilize excessive permissions, against the well-known principle of least privilege to limit opportunities for attackers to breach a system.</p> <p>The security controls outlined in CISA's list serve as a useful checklist for organizations, many of which deployed remote-working IT infrastructure hastily due to the pandemic, and amid today's heightened geopolitical tensions due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It also follows the EU joining the US-Five Eyes in jointly blaming the Russian military on this year's cyberattack against Viasat's European satellite broadband users.</p> <p>As noted in the joint alert, attackers commonly exploit public-facing applications, external remote services, and use phishing to obtain valid credentials and exploit trusted relationships and valid accounts.</p>

The joint alert recommends MFA is enforced for everyone, especially since RDP is commonly used to deploy ransomware. "Do not exclude any user, particularly administrators, from an MFA requirement," CISA notes.

Incorrectly applied privileges or permissions and errors in access control lists can prevent the enforcement of access control rules and could give unauthorized users or system processes access to objects.

Of course, make sure software is up to date. But also don't use vendor-supplied default configurations or default usernames and passwords. These might be 'user friendly' and help the vendor deliver faster troubleshooting, but they're often publicly available 'secrets'. The NSA [strongly urges admins to remove vendor-supplied defaults](#) in its network infrastructure security guidance.

"Network devices are also often pre-configured with default administrator usernames and passwords to simplify setup," CISA notes. "These default credentials are not secure – they may be physically labeled on the device or even readily available on the internet. Leaving these credentials unchanged creates opportunities for malicious activity, including gaining unauthorized access to information and installing malicious software."

CISA notes that remote services, such as VPNs, lack sufficient controls to prevent unauthorized access. Defenders should add access control mechanisms like MFA to reduce risks. Also, put the VPN behind a firewall, and use IDS and IPS sensors to detect suspicious network activity.

Other key problems include: strong password policies are not implemented; open ports and internet-exposed services that can be scanned via the internet by attackers; failure to detect or block phishing using Microsoft Word and Excel documents booby-trapped with malicious macros; and poor endpoint detection and response.

CISA's recommendations include control access measures, implanting credential hardening, establishing centralized log management, using antivirus, employing detection tools and searching for vulnerabilities, maintaining configuration management programs, and implementing patch management.

CISA also recommends adopting a zero-trust security model, but this is likely a long-term goal. US federal agencies [have until 2024 to make significant headway on this](#) aim.

The full list of security 'don'ts' includes:

- Multifactor authentication (MFA) is not enforced.
- Incorrectly applied privileges or permissions and errors within access control lists.
- Software is not up to date.
- Use of vendor-supplied default configurations or default login usernames and passwords.
- Remote services, such as VPNs, lack sufficient controls to prevent unauthorized access.
- Strong password policies are not implemented.
- Cloud services are unprotected.
- Open ports and misconfigured services are exposed to the internet.
- Failure to detect or block phishing attempts.
- Poor endpoint detection and response.

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HEADLINE	05/18 Microsoft: campaign targets SQL Servers
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/05/hackers-gain-fileless-persistence-on.html
GIST	<p>Microsoft on Tuesday warned that it recently spotted a malicious campaign targeting SQL Servers that leverages a built-in PowerShell binary to achieve persistence on compromised systems.</p> <p>The intrusions, which leverage brute-force attacks as an initial compromise vector, stand out for their use of the utility "sqlps.exe," the tech giant said in a series of tweets.</p>

The ultimate goals of the campaign are unknown, as is the identity of the threat actor staging it. Microsoft is tracking the malware under the name "[SuspSQLUsage](#)."

The sqlps.exe utility, which comes by default with all versions of SQL Servers, enables an SQL Agent — a Windows service to run scheduled tasks — to run jobs using the PowerShell subsystem.

"The attackers achieve fileless persistence by spawning the sqlps.exe utility, a PowerShell wrapper for running SQL-built cmdlets, to run recon commands and change the start mode of the SQL service to LocalSystem," Microsoft noted.

Additionally, the attackers have also been observed using the same module to create a new account with [sysadmin role](#), effectively making it possible to seize control over the SQL Server.

This is not the first time threat actors have weaponized [legitimate binaries](#) already present in an environment, a technique called living-off-the-land (LotL), to achieve their nefarious goals.

An advantage offered by such attacks is that they tend to be [fileless](#) because they do not leave any artifacts behind and the activities are less likely to be flagged by antivirus software owing to them using trusted software.

The idea is to allow the attacker to blend in with regular network activity and normal administrative tasks, while remaining hidden for extended periods of time.

"The use of this uncommon living-off-the-land binary (LOLBin) highlights the importance of gaining full visibility into the runtime behavior of scripts in order to expose malicious code," Microsoft said.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Ransomware hits healthcare firm Omnicell
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/ransomware-healthcare-omnicell/
GIST	<p>Multinational company Omnicell recently confirmed that it had experienced a data breach following a reported ransomware attack, impacting internal systems.</p> <p>The company, headquartered in Mountain View, California, USA, learned of the ransomware attack, which it disclosed on May 9 2022 in a 10-Q filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission. More details are likely to be disclosed in the coming weeks.</p> <p>In the company's quarterly 10-Q filing, Omnicell stated: "Our IT systems and third-party cloud services are potentially vulnerable to cyber-attacks, including ransomware, or other data security incidents, by employees or others, which may expose sensitive data to unauthorized persons. On May 4, 2022, we determined that certain of our information technology systems were affected by ransomware impacting certain internal systems."</p> <p>The company expanded to detail the possible damage of the breach: "Data security incidents could lead to the loss of trade secrets or other intellectual property, or to the public exposure of sensitive and confidential information of our employees, customers, suppliers and others."</p> <p>As of May 17, Omnicell has not posted official notice of the breach on its website. However, more information about the Omnicell breach is expected to be made available as the investigation continues.</p> <p>Various reports this year have highlighted the cyber risks that US healthcare providers are facing. This month, Oklahoma City Indian Clinic (OKCIC) announced that it experienced a data breach exposing personally identifiable information (PII) of nearly 40,000 individuals.</p>

	In March of 2022, US Senators proposed a new bill, known as the Healthcare Cybersecurity Act (S.3904), following a White House warning over the increased risk to American healthcare providers from cyber-threats stemming from Russia.
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HEADLINE	05/18 Alert: top cyberattack mistakes
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/western-allies-warn-of-top/
GIST	<p>The security agencies of five countries have outlined 10 of the most common ways threat actors compromise their victims, most of which can be mitigated by basic cyber-hygiene best practices.</p> <p>The alert comes from the cybersecurity authorities of the US, Canada, New Zealand, the Netherlands and the UK.</p> <p>It focuses on weak security controls, poor configurations and sub-par security practices. Many of these relate to logins, including a lack of multi-factor authentication (MFA); use of default logins and usernames; an absence of strong password policies; and errors within access control lists.</p> <p>Unpatched software is also listed, as is a lack of sufficient security controls applied to remote access services like VPNs. In many cases, MFA, firewalls and intrusion detection/prevention (IDS/IPS) are not applied to these systems, the alert claimed.</p> <p>Misconfigured cloud services, open ports and misconfigured high-risk services such as SMB, RDP, Telnet and NetBIOS also pose a significant threat to organizations.</p> <p>Finally, failures to detect and block phishing attempts and poor endpoint detection and response were highlighted as opening the door to attackers.</p> <p>The security agencies advised organizations to take the following mitigation steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control access by adopting a zero trust model and other measures. • Implement credential hardening, including MFA. • Establish centralized log management to improve threat detection. • Deploy anti-malware on workstations and regularly monitor scan results. • Deploy detection tools on the endpoint, network and in the cloud, alongside vulnerability scanning. • Maintain rigorous configuration management programs. • Implement a software and patch management program. <p>Security experts welcomed the guidance. Mike Newman, CEO of My1Login, argued that it provides “great intelligence” for organizations.</p> <p>“The advisory also highlights just how frequently weak passwords and user credentials appear in attacker exploits,” he added.</p> <p>“Whether it be through exploiting default passwords, phishing, guessing insecure passwords, a failure to deploy MFA, or using stolen login credentials, passwords are clearly a key enabler behind several cyber-attack scenarios.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Digital skimming by non-Magecart groups
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/digital-skimming-non-magecart/
GIST	<p>Less than a fifth of digital skimming activity at the start of the year was linked to Magecart groups, as cheap tools lowered the barrier to entry for less sophisticated cyber-criminals, according to new research.</p> <p>RiskIQ analyzed the cybercrime underground and customer environments across the first quarter of 2022 to better understand the latest trends in a market that used to be dominated by Magecart.</p>

[It found](#) that just 18% of detections in the quarter were traced back to one of the several groups using Magecart skimmers. By contrast, 40% were attributed to “generic, potentially modular, or commodity skimmer kits.” That’s more than double the figure of March 2021.

Magecart refers to several distinct cybercrime groups that virtually pioneered the use of malicious JavaScript to steal credit card details. The malicious code is injected onto the payment pages of e-commerce sites either directly or via the victim organization’s supply chain partners.

Its name comes from Magento, the first type of third-party shopping software targeted back in 2016. Big-name victims over the years include Ticketmaster and British Airways.

However, the availability of cheap, easy-to-use skimmers is changing the underground market, RiskIQ claimed.

“The recent growth of commodity malware and ransomware highlights a natural progression into commodity and kit skimmers,” it said. “Easily modifiable with high profitability potential, skimmers with relatively simple functionality can be altered in minor ways to suit new criminals.”

This is not to say Magecart is in permanent decline: RiskIQ observed twice as many detections related to Magecart’s C&C infrastructure in Q1 2022 compared to March 2021.

“Magecart Group 7, Group 12, and Group 8 remain highly active while changing very little in their operations,” it warned.

“In this case, the adage, ‘don’t fix what isn’t broken,’ applies. When targeted retailers remain unaware of skimmer activity, threat actors will continue to operate with their tried and tested, effective scheme.”

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HEADLINE	05/17 FBI flash alert: online businesses targeted
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/fbi-e-tailers-beware-web-injections-for-scraping-credit-card-data-backdoors
GIST	<p>Cyberattackers are targeting US online businesses by injecting malicious PHP code into e-commerce checkout pages and exfiltrating scraped data to a command-and-control (C2) server spoofed to look like a legitimate credit-card processor.</p> <p>That's according to a flash alert from the FBI issued this week, which detailed one attack in particular that began in September 2020. Along with scraping credit-card data, the cybercriminals were modifying the business checkout page code to gain backdoor access to the business' system. The FBI provided indicators of compromise and recommended mitigations for similar e-tailers, including patching and ongoing monitoring of e-commerce environments.</p> <p>Businesses Should Take Alert 'Seriously'</p> <p>Cyavatar CISO Dave Cundiff explained in an emailed reaction to the alert that basic cybersecurity hygiene and monitoring would be enough to fend off this sort of attack.</p> <p>"Continually verifying and monitoring an organization's fundamental cybersecurity is a requirement these days," Cundiff said. "If the fundamentals of an organization’s security are not strong, then the additional complexity of any additional security is useless."</p> <p>US businesses should take this alert seriously, according to Kunal Modasiya, senior director of product management at PerimeterX.</p>

	<p>"Given the risks of supply-chain attacks in general, it is important that businesses look beyond server-side security tools, such as static code analysis, external scanners, and the limitations of CSP to solutions," Modasiya says.</p> <p>Ron Bradley, vice president of Shared Assessments, meanwhile notes that organizations dealing with credit-card data, which he called "one of the crown jewels for fraudsters," should have technical controls like file integrity monitoring (FIM) in place.</p> <p>"If you're running a website, especially one which transacts funds, and if you don't have FIM implemented, I don't want to shop there," Bradley said. "Furthermore, you're going to get pummeled by bad actors because you don't have your house in order."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 US, EU move closer on cyber: trade pact
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/us-eu-move-closer-cyber-new-trade/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Representatives from the European Union (EU) and US government have jointly announced a range of new initiatives in areas such as SMB and supply chain security, tackling disinformation, sanctions evasion and the development of trustworthy AI and privacy-enhancing technologies.</p> <p>The outcomes were announced after a second ministerial meeting of the US-EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC) in Paris on May 15-16.</p> <p>Many of the announcements were given extra urgency by current Russian aggression in Ukraine.</p> <p>On that note, there's a new Cooperation Framework on issues related to information integrity in crises, particularly concerning the Kremlin's attempt to "manipulate and censor" information.</p> <p>There will also be closer information exchange between the two parties on critical tech exports, with an initial focus on Russia and other sanctions-evading countries.</p> <p>On a more positive note, the TTC agreed to produce a cybersecurity best practice guide for SMBs, which it said were "disproportionately" impacted by cyber-threats.</p> <p>There were also commitments to "promote secure, resilient, diverse, competitive, transparent, and sustainable digital, telecommunications, and ICTS infrastructure supply chains."</p> <p>Regarding emerging technologies, the EU and US agreed to develop a joint roadmap to evaluate tools for "trustworthy AI and risk management," alongside a project on privacy-enhancing technologies.</p> <p>Perhaps with one eye on China's increasing presence in the international standards community, the TTC also announced the creation of a "US-EU Strategic Standardization Information (SSI) mechanism" to facilitate information sharing on international standards development.</p> <p>John Dickson, VP at advisory firm Coalfire, described the agreement as significant.</p> <p>"Supply chain disruption from Russian and Ukrainian suppliers most certainly affects European manufacturers compared to their US counterparts," he added.</p> <p>"This reality will also drive deeper cooperation with the European Union on a variety of fronts, including cybersecurity. If there are any Russian attempts by to expand the conflict outside Ukraine in the cybersecurity realm, closer cooperation on that front will be an imperative."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 UpdateAgent returns: new macOS malware
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/05/updateagent-returns-with-new-macos.html?&web_view=true

GIST	<p>A new variant of the macOS malware tracked as UpdateAgent has been spotted in the wild, indicating ongoing attempts on the part of its authors to upgrade its functionalities.</p> <p>"Perhaps one of the most identifiable features of the malware is that it relies on the AWS infrastructure to host its various payloads and perform its infection status updates to the server," researchers from Jamf Threat Labs said in a report.</p> <p>UpdateAgent, first detected in late 2020, has since evolved into a malware dropper, facilitating the distribution of second-stage payloads such as adware while also bypassing macOS Gatekeeper protections.</p> <p>The newly discovered Swift-based dropper masquerades as Mach-O binaries named "PDFCreator" and "ActiveDirectory" that, upon execution, establish a connection to a remote server and retrieve a bash script to be executed.</p> <p>"The primary difference [between the two executables] is that it reaches out to a different URL from which it should load a bash script," the researchers noted.</p> <p>These bash scripts, named "activedirec.sh" or "bash_golveevgclr.sh", include a URL pointing to Amazon S3 buckets to download and run a second-stage disk image (DMG) file to the compromised endpoint.</p> <p>"The continued development of this malware shows that its authors continue to remain active, trying to reach as many users as possible," the researchers said.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Military building own metaverse
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/military-metaverse/
GIST	<p>ON MAY 10, two fighter pilots performed a high-altitude proto-metaverse experiment. A few thousand feet above the desert of California, in a pair of Berkut 540 jets, they donned custom AR headsets to connect to a system that overlaid a ghostly, glowing image of a refueling aircraft flying alongside them in the sky. One of the pilots then performed a refueling maneuver with the virtual tanker while the other looked on. Welcome to the fledgling military metaverse.</p> <p>It isn't only Silicon Valley that's gripped by metaverse mania these days. Just as tech companies and corporations are scrambling to develop strategies for virtual worlds, many defense startups, contractors, and funders are increasingly talking up the metaverse, even if its definition and utility aren't always clear.</p> <p>The key technologies needed for the metaverse—augmented and virtual reality, headmounted displays, 3D simulations and virtual environments built by artificial intelligence—are already found in the defense world. The result is a lot less polished, cutesy, and spacious than Mark Zuckerberg's virtual world vision, but that's partly the point. And there's a good chance that the underlying tech could take off, even if it stutters in the civilian realm.</p> <p>A mix of augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and video game graphics, for instance, have enabled fighter pilots to practice dogfighting against virtual opponents, including Chinese and Russian warplanes, while pulling several Gs. Red 6, the company that's developing the technology, says this delivers a far more realistic test of a pilot's abilities than a conventional flight simulator. "We can fly against whatever threat we want," says Daniel Robinson, founder and CEO of Red 6. "And that threat could be controlled either by an individual remotely or by artificial intelligence."</p> <p>Red6's AR technology has to work in more extreme conditions, with lower latency and higher reliability than consumer AR or VR headsets. Robinson adds that the company is now working on a platform that will allow many different scenarios to be represented in augmented or virtual reality. "What we're building is really a military metaverse," he says. "It's like a multiplayer video game in the sky."</p>

Metaverse-related ideas are already part of some of the latest military systems. The [high-tech helmet](#) for the new F-35 fighter jet, for instance, includes an augmented reality display that [shows telemetry data and target information on top of video footage](#) from around the aircraft. In 2018, the US Army announced that it would pay Microsoft up to \$22 billion to develop a version of its [HoloLens](#) augmented reality system for warfighters, known as the Integrated Visual Augmentation System (IVAS).

VR and AR have become routine aspects of military training in recent years. In 2014, the [Office of Naval Research](#) and the [Institute for Creative Technologies](#) at the University of Southern California developed [Project BlueShark](#), a system that allowed sailors to drive vessels and collaborate in a virtual environment. Another effort, called [Project Avenger](#), is now used to help train US Navy pilots. The US Air Force is [using VR to teach pilots](#) how to manage aircraft and missions. VR is also used to [help treat veterans](#) for chronic pain and post-traumatic stress. And Boeing has [created an AR environment](#) that lets mechanics practice working on planes before stepping aboard a real one.

Recently, the US military has begun exploring more complex virtual worlds. There is also growing interest in connecting and combining virtual worlds in a way that resembles metaverse thinking. In December 2021, the US Air Force held a high-level conference involving over 250 people in locations stretching from the US to Japan, via a virtual environment. “The promise is integrating these technologies,” says Caitlin Dohrman, general manager of the defense division of [Improbable](#), a company that develops virtual world technologies, has created sprawling virtual battlefields featuring over 10,000 individually controlled characters for the UK’s military wargames, and also works with the US Department of Defense (DOD). “It is an extremely complex type of simulation, especially given the fidelity that the military demands,” Dohrman says. “You can either have live players who are participating in the simulation or [characters] can be AI-enabled, which is often what the military does.”

[Palmer Luckey](#), the founder of Oculus, a VR company Facebook acquired in 2014, says Zuckerberg’s decision to go all-in on VR and the metaverse created a massive amount of expectation in the commercial world. “Everyone on their quarterly corporate calls, like a week or two later, they’re being asked by investors, ‘What’s your metaverse play?’,” he says.

In 2017, Luckey cofounded the defense company [Anduril](#). He says that despite all the recent metaverse hype, there is big defense potential, partly because military training is so important and costly. But he says the technology does not have to be hyper-realistic to be useful, and he wants Anduril to focus on only using the technology where necessary. “Everything we’re doing with VR is something where it is uniquely better than any other option,” he says. This includes using VR to train people to operate Anduril’s drones, he says, or to display information about an area using data from sensors on the ground.

As with Zuckerberg’s planned metaverse, newer military systems rely heavily on AI to be effective. In October 2020, the AR technology developed by Red6 was used to pit a real fighter pilot against an aircraft controlled by an AI algorithm developed as part of a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) [AI dogfighting project](#). The AI top gun, created by another startup called [EpiSci](#), learned how to outmaneuver and outgun an opponent through a process of trial and error. The AI pilot eventually developed superhuman skills and was able to beat its human opponent every time.

Another DARPA project, called [Perceptually-enabled Task Guidance](#), aims to create an AI assistant that watches what a soldier is doing and offers advice through speech, sound, or graphics. In contrast to the augmented reality system developed by Boeing, which only works in a specific setting, such a system would need to make sense of the real world. [Bruce Draper](#), the DARPA program manager responsible, says the real value of technologies being explored by the military lies in merging the real and the virtual.

“The metaverse is mostly virtual, and virtual worlds are useful for training, but we live in the physical world,” he says. “The military domain is inherently physical, it’s not about an abstract metaverse.”

But efforts to merge the virtual and the real world have encountered problems. In March 2022, a leaked Microsoft memo [reportedly showed](#) that those working on IVAS, the US Army version of the HoloLens AR headset, expected it to be received badly by users. And an audit released by the DOD in April 2022

concluded that the US Army could waste its money as a result. Jason Kuruvilla, a senior communications manager at Microsoft, shared several statements from high-ranking army figures proclaiming the potential of the IVAS. He also pointed to a 2021 DOD [report](#) that discusses the importance of developing IVAS rapidly, allowing problems to be ironed out along the way.

Such high-profile and expensive endeavors have only boosted the confidence of those pushing the military metaverse. "I know that this is the future of military training," says [Doug Philippon](#), global defense lead at Palantir, a defense company that has invested in both Anduril and Red6. "But I also see it as the future of the way that the military fights and makes decisions. So it's not just about fighting, it's about making decisions."

Luckey says Anduril is already working on technology that could do this in training missions and combat. "The next big step for us, which I am really excited about, is taking from our core product and piping that data to heads-up displays that troops on the front line are going to be able to wear," he says.

But how much of this cutting-edge tech makes it to the front line—or even into training exercises—remains unclear. [Sorin Adam Matei](#), a professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, who has developed virtual battlefield training platforms for the US military, says the tech deployed will often be considerably simpler than metaverse boosters imagine. He suggests that a simpler version of the IVAS headset may eventually be integrated into an AR rifle scope. "When you are out there shooting and being shot at, the last thing you want to worry about is another piece of equipment," he says. And technology does not need to be as expansive as a metaverse to be useful. "We need to think a bit more about this metaverse metaphor—which is powerful but also has its limitations."

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HEADLINE	05/18 Hackers hire cold callers to scare victims
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/wizard-spider-hacking-group-hires-cold-callers-to-scare-ransomware-victims-into-paying-up/
GIST	<p>Researchers have exposed the inner workings of Wizard Spider, a hacking group that pours its illicit proceeds back into the criminal enterprise.</p> <p>On Wednesday, PRODAFT published the results of an investigation into Wizard Spider, believed to either be or be associated with the Grim Spider and Lunar Spider hacking groups.</p> <p>According to the cybersecurity firm, Wizard Spider, likely Russian in origin, runs an infrastructure made up of a "complex set of sub-teams and groups, [...] has huge numbers of compromised devices at its command and employs a highly distributed professional workflow to maintain security and a high operational tempo."</p> <p>Today's more sophisticated cybercriminal operations, whether purely for profit or working for state interests -- as with many advanced persistent threat (APT) groups -- often operate business-style models. This includes hiring top talent and creating a financial framework to deposit, transfer, and launder proceeds.</p> <p>In Wizard Spider's case, this also means pouring some of its profits back into development with investments in tools and software, and paying for new hires. The report suggests that the group commands "hundreds of millions of dollars in assets."</p> <p>"The group's extraordinary profitability allows its leaders to invest in illicit research and development initiatives," the researchers say. "Wizard Spider is fully capable of hiring specialist talent, building new digital infrastructure, and purchasing access to advanced exploits."</p> <p>PRODAFT says that Wizard Spider focuses on compromising enterprise networks and "has a significant presence in almost every developed country in the world, and many emerging economies as well."</p>

Victims have included defense contractors, enterprise firms, supply chain vendors, hospitals, and critical utility providers.

Wizard Spider's attacks tend to start through spam and phishing using QBot and the SystemBC proxy. The group may also infiltrate businesses through compromised email threads between employees in Business Email Compromise (BEC) schemes.

Once there's a crack in the door, the group will deploy Cobalt Strike and will attempt to grab domain administrator privileges. The Conti ransomware strain is deployed, machines and hypervisor servers are encrypted, and a ransomware demand is made.

Victims are managed through a locker control panel.

Wizard Spider also uses virtual private networks (VPNs) and proxies to hide their tracks. However, the group has also invested in some unusual tools, including VoIP systems and employees tasked with cold-calling individuals and scaring them into paying up after a security incident.

This is a tactic [employed in the past](#) by a handful of other ransomware groups including Sekhmet, Maze, and Ryuk. Coveware suspects that this kind of 'call center' work may be outsourced by cybercriminals, as the templates and scripts used are often "basically the same."

Another tool of note is the Wizard Spider cracking station. This custom kit stores cracked hashes and runs crackers to try and secure domain credentials and other forms of common hashes. The station also updates the team on cracking status. As of now, there are 32 active users.

Several intrusion servers were also discovered containing a cache of tactics, techniques, exploits, cryptocurrency wallet information, and encrypted .ZIP files containing notes made and shared by attack teams.

"The Wizard Spider team has shown itself capable of monetizing multiple aspects of its operations," PRODAFT says. "It is responsible for an enormous quantity of spam on hundreds of millions of devices, as well as concentrated data breaches and ransomware attacks on high-value targets."

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HEADLINE	05/17 Officials warn: spike in romance scams
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/may/17/love-trap-officials-warn-spike-romance-scams-summer/
GIST	<p>Romance scams including fake online dating profiles and would-be “sugar mommas” are increasing as summer approaches, according to U.S. officials who have struggled to stop them.</p> <p>As of Tuesday, the Better Business Bureau’s Online Scam Tracker showed that 395 romance scams had been reported in the U.S. since Jan. 1. The most recent was reported Sunday.</p> <p>That was more than the 276 reports that the bureau received last year, itself a 13% increase from 2020, as “Cupid scams” soared during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>“There are a lot of lonely people who are looking for companionship and who want to believe they’ve found a soul mate,” Judge Tanya Acker, a celebrity judge who has adjudicated romance scams on the CBS reality series “Hot Bench,” told The Washington Times in an email.</p> <p>The FBI’s Houston office reported in February that romance scams cost Americans looking for love a record \$1 billion in 2021, up from \$600 million the year before. There are signs it could be worse this year.</p> <p>Since law enforcement officials rarely recover money from the scammers, Judge Acker said, most victims end up seeking relief in small claims court.</p>

“They aren’t just being silly and naive,” Judge Acker said. “The villains who groom them have targeted and studied them and have invested time softening them up for the scam.”

Cybersecurity expert Vahid Behzadan, director of the Secure and Assured Intelligent Learning Lab, said it’s essential to take precautions because romance scams “imitate organic relationships in terms of their evolution and dynamics,” making them harder to detect than phishing links in emails.

Romance-related scams “are often long-term cons, and the scammers invest significant efforts in building the confidence and connection required for exploiting their victims,” Mr. Behzadan said.

“Moreover, the victims themselves are often too invested in the relationship to detect and report such scams until it is too late to prevent or prosecute” the fraud, he said.

The FBI said in a statement that most pandemic-era romance scams use social media messaging and emails to establish “a fraudulent relationship as quickly as possible, without ever meeting in person.”

“In this type of fraud, scammers target and take advantage of people looking for companionship or romantic partners and con them out of their money,” the FBI said.

The FBI said many scammers create fake identities with other people’s photos on social media apps or dating websites, build trust with flattery of lonely singles — especially seniors — and then steal their financial information or hit them up for requests for money, gifts and bogus investments.

Since romance scams are “intensely personal,” the FBI said, victims often wait too long to report them out of embarrassment or misplaced affection.

In a survey of the problem this week, the online news website Pew Stateline reported on the case of Jeanne Aikens, a widowed Boston Children’s Hospital nursing manager in her late 60s.

Ms. Aikens, who had cared for her husband through Parkinson’s disease, gave more than \$200,000 to a man named “Logan” in several wire transfers after she met him on a dating website in 2018.

“I wasn’t worried about the funds because he always said he would pay it back. He always agreed,” Ms. Aikens told Pew in an interview.

“He asked me to send him a spreadsheet with an accounting of all of the funds. What was I to worry about? I sent him a spreadsheet.”

While “Logan” claimed to be short on money while traveling in the United Kingdom, Ms. Aikens ignored worried family members and bankers who questioned the transfers.

Targeting men, too

Women aren’t the only target of online romance fraud.

In Michigan, the Traverse City Record-Eagle reported Monday that a 63-year-old Garfield Township man lost \$100,000 to a woman he met on social media after she claimed her disposable income was tied up with family in London.

The man met her once in person before reporting to police that she stole money out of his escrow account, the newspaper reported.

In a more colorful episode, the U.S. attorney’s office in the District of Utah reported last week that a 34-year-old Utah man was sentenced to 63 months in prison after posing as an American military general to swindle \$8.4 million out of more than 350 divorced women.

Jeffersonking Anyanwu, a resident of the town of Orem, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit money laundering after creating a series of fake online profiles in which he posed as a 55- to 65-year-old military man.

The Better Business Bureau reported in February that some scammers pose as older “sugar mommas” who offer to pay young men’s bills for them. Others pose as “sugar daddies” for young women.

In all romance scams, the fraudsters get access to a target’s personal information and use it to drain their victims’ finances. The shift to more online dating during pandemic-induced shutdowns made the problem worse. Those new to the web and the online dating scene were particularly vulnerable.

“With COVID-19 restrictions limiting physical interactions with others, many have turned to online dating and social media over the past two years to find love and meet new people,” the BBB said in a Feb. 11 alert.

“Unfortunately, these platforms have not only made it easier than ever to meet new people and find dates, but have also made it easier to be scammed as well,” the alert added.

U.S. officials have tried in vain to slow the scams.

The New York State Assembly passed a bill this month to have banks warn consumers of possible scams when they set up electronic fund transfers from their accounts to other individuals.

Still, experts say Americans can more easily avoid the schemes by restricting online interactions.

The FBI said people should never send money electronically, reveal credit or banking information, or give their Social Security numbers to acquaintances they have dealt with only virtually. They should also limit what they share, ask lots of questions and research the person’s profile online.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Russian hacking cartel attacks Costa Rica
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/us/politics/russia-hacking-costa-rica.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — A Russian hacking cartel carried out an extraordinary cyberattack against the government of Costa Rica, crippling tax collection and export systems for more than a month so far and forcing the country to declare a state of emergency.</p> <p>The ransomware gang Conti, which is based in Russia, claimed credit for the attack, which began on April 12, and has threatened to leak the stolen information unless it is paid \$20 million. Experts who track Conti’s movements said the group had recently begun to shift its focus from the United States and Europe to countries in Central and South America, perhaps to retaliate against nations that have supported Ukraine.</p> <p>Some experts also believe Conti feared a crackdown by the United States and was seeking fresh targets, regardless of politics. The group is responsible for more than 1,000 ransomware attacks worldwide that have led to earnings of more than \$150 million, according to estimates from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.</p> <p>“The ransomware cartels figured out multinationals in the U.S. and Western Europe are less likely to blink if they need to pay some ungodly sum in order to get their business running,” said Juan Andres Guerrero-Saade, a principal threat researcher at SentinelOne. “But at some point, you are going to tap out that space.”</p> <p>Whatever the reason for the shift, the hack showed that Conti was still acting aggressively despite speculation that the gang might disband after it was the target of a hacking operation in the early days of Russia’s war on Ukraine. The criminal group, which pledged its support to Russia after the invasion,</p>

routinely targets businesses and local government agencies by breaking into their systems, encrypting data and demanding a ransom to restore it.

Of the Costa Rica hacking, Brett Callow, a threat analyst at Emsisoft, said that “it’s possibly the most significant ransomware attack to date.”

“This is the first time I can recall a ransomware attack resulting in a national emergency being declared,” he said.

Costa Rica has said it refused to pay the ransom.

The hacking campaign occurred after Costa Rica’s presidential elections and quickly became a political cudgel. The previous administration downplayed the attack in its first official news releases, portraying it as a technical problem and projecting an image of stability and calm. But the newly elected president, Rodrigo Chaves, began his term by declaring a national emergency.

“We are at war,” Mr. Chaves said during a news conference on Monday. He said 27 government institutions had been affected by the ransomware attack, nine of them significantly.

The attack began on April 12, according to Mr. Chaves’s administration, when hackers who said they were affiliated with Conti broke into Costa Rica’s Ministry of Finance, which oversees the country’s tax system. From there, the ransomware spread to other agencies that oversee technology and telecommunications, the government said this month.

Two former officials with the Ministry of Finance, who were not authorized to speak publicly, said the hackers were able to gain access to taxpayers’ information and interrupt Costa Rica’s tax collection process, forcing the agency to shut down some databases and resort to using a nearly 15-year-old system to store revenue from its largest taxpayers. Much of the nation’s tax revenue comes from a relatively small pool of about a thousand major taxpayers, making it possible for Costa Rica to continue tax collection.

The country also relies on exports, and the cyberattack forced customs agents to do their work solely on paper. While the investigation and recovery are underway, taxpayers in Costa Rica are forced to file their tax declarations in person at financial institutions rather than relying on online services.

Mr. Chaves is a former World Bank official and finance minister who has promised to shake up the political system. His government declared a state of emergency this month in response to the cyberattack, calling it “unprecedented in the country.”

“We are facing a situation of unavoidable disaster, of public calamity and internal and abnormal commotion that, without extraordinary measures, cannot be controlled by the government,” Mr. Chaves’s administration said in its emergency declaration.

The state of emergency allows agencies to move more quickly to remedy the breach, the government said. But cybersecurity researchers said that a partial recovery could take months, and that the government may not ever fully recover its data. The government may have backups of some of its taxpayer information, but it would take some time for those backups to come online, and the government would first need to ensure it had removed Conti’s access to its systems, researchers said.

Paying the ransom would not guarantee a recovery because Conti and other ransomware groups have been known to withhold data even after receiving a payment.

“Unless they pay the ransom, which they have stated they have no intention of doing, or have backups that are going to enable them to recover their data, they are potentially looking at total, permanent data loss,” Mr. Callow said.

	<p>When Costa Rica refused to pay the ransom, Conti began threatening to leak its data online, posting some files it claimed contained stolen information.</p> <p>“It is impossible to look at the decisions of the administration of the president of Costa Rica without irony,” the group wrote on its website. “All this could have been avoided by paying.”</p> <p>On Saturday, Conti raised the stakes, threatening to delete the keys to restore the data if it did not receive payment within a week.</p> <p>“With governments, intelligence agencies and diplomatic circles, the debilitating part of the attack is really not the ransomware. It’s the data exfiltration,” said Mr. Guerrero-Saade of SentinelOne. “You’re in a position where presumably incredibly sensitive information is in the hands of a third party.”</p> <p>The breach, among other attacks carried out by Conti, led the U.S. State Department to join with the Costa Rican government to offer a \$10 million reward to anyone who provided information that led to the identification of key leaders of the hacking group.</p> <p>“The group perpetrated a ransomware incident against the government of Costa Rica that severely impacted the country’s foreign trade by disrupting its customs and taxes platforms,” a State Department spokesman, Ned Price, said in a statement. “In offering this reward, the United States demonstrates its commitment to protecting potential ransomware victims around the world from exploitation by cybercriminals.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Popular ‘New Profile Pic’ app a scam?
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/is-new-profile-pic-app-a-scam-rumors-claim-its-russian-malware
GIST	<p>An app called "New Profile Pic" is quickly gaining popularity, but now users are asking if the app is a Russian malware scam. But are there any validity to those rumors?</p> <p>In its description, "New Profile Pic" says the app "lets you change your user image style as often as you want. Dare to be different, with a profile pic that reflects your current mood or state of mind. Impress your friends on social media and keep them interested in what's coming next! ;)"</p> <p>It says it creates a new picture for you based on one you upload upswing AI-driven cartoon portraits.</p> <p>However, once the app gained popularity, many social users claimed the app was stealing users' data for criminal purposes. Another rumor claimed that your personal and financial data was going to Russia.</p> <p>The rumors also escalated when the Daily Mail reported on the claim. The Daily Mail's post was flagged as part of Facebook’s efforts to combat false news and misinformation on its news feed.</p> <p>According to Snopes, the site and app were initially registered in Russia, because its founder is Russian. However, he is not living in Russia at the moment and the address has been changed to avoid confusion.</p> <p>Both Snopes and PolitiFact looked into "New Profile Pic's" privacy policy and found that it requested app permissions that are similar to mainstream apps. Neither app in the App Store for Apple or Google Play indicated that it accessed people's banking or contact information in the fine print, according to PolitiFact.</p> <p>"We collect your name, email address, username, social network information and other information you provide when you register, set up an account, contact us by e-mail or use our services," according to Linerock Investment Ltd, the company that copyrights the group that develops the mobile app. "We may also obtain information from other companies and combine that with the information we collect on the Services."</p> <p>Users’ photos are stored in the Amazon cloud, based in the US, and deleted two weeks after they are uploaded, according to the company.</p>

App creator and founder of Linerock Investment, Victor Sazhain, is from Russia and responded to the rumors:

"The war between Russia and Ukraine has been always unthinkable. And it should be again.

Our team has development offices in Moscow and Kiev, Novosibirsk and Odessa. Our iOS team is mostly Russian. Our Android team - mostly Ukrainian.

I personally was born in USSR in Moscow and moved to Krivyi Rih being two months old. Very literally my fatherland is Russia and my motherland is Ukraine.

With Moscow being my home and Kryvyi Rih being a beloved city of my childhood, I never would imagine discussing a matter of war between our nations.

It always was something unimaginable, like a war between US and Canada or France and Belgium. And now it became somewhat expected if you read the news.

Unfortunately the very possibility of such war is something that benefits many speakers. For Russian Government it is a leverage to get concessions from the West. For their Ukrainian counterparts - a leverage to get international financial aid. And for US and EU politicians it is a great subject to distract their people from their government's failures.

Nobody really wants this war, nobody actually tries to make it happen. But constantly emphasising it being a possibility, they made the war not that unthinkable anymore. And this is the most dangerous thing. Probably the only thing that can make it possible.

The window of discourse is dangerously shifted, so let's move it back where it belongs: That War is Unthinkable!"

Both [PolitiFact](#) and Snopes say the rumors are false and have not seen any evidence that the app is taking additional personal information and sending it to Russia for criminal use.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	05/18 SIGAR: US withdrawal led to swift surrender
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/world/afghanistans-swift-surrender-taliban-us-military-withdrawal-watchdog
GIST	<p>The surprisingly swift collapse of the Afghan military to Taliban forces last summer, which surprised combat experts, was mostly due to the withdrawal of America's troops, a U.S. watchdog group said.</p> <p>In a report made public Tuesday, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, said the withdrawal "destroyed" the morale of the Afghan forces and left them without vital air support in their struggle to keep Afghanistan from falling to the Taliban, Reuters reported.</p> <p>The report highlighted that the withdrawal of U.S. troops was a condition of an agreement made and signed by the Trump administration in February 2020 and later carried out by the Biden administration.</p> <p>"SIGAR found that the single most important factor in the ANDSF's (Afghan National Defense and Security Forces) collapse in August 2021 was the U.S. decision to withdraw military forces and contractors from Afghanistan through signing the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020 under the Trump administration, followed by President Biden's withdrawal announcement in April 2021," the report said.</p> <p>The withdrawal agreement also limited the use of airstrikes by the fleeing U.S. forces.</p>

"Limiting airstrikes after the signing of the U.S.-[Taliban](#) agreement the following year left the ANDSF without a key advantage in keeping the Taliban at bay," John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, said, according to the report.

"Many Afghans thought the U.S.-Taliban agreement was an act of bad faith and a signal that the U.S. was handing over Afghanistan to the enemy as it rushed to exit the country," Sopko added.

The Afghan government surrendered to the Taliban after just over a week of fighting.

At the time, [President Biden](#) defended the U.S. withdrawal, which brought an end to more than 20 years of American troops fighting in the country. The U.S. also reportedly spent over \$80 billion in the war effort.

"Our military commanders advised me that once I made the decision to end the war, we needed to move swiftly to conduct the main elements of the drawdown. And in this context, speed is safety," Biden said in July 2021, ahead of the August withdrawal.

Following Afghanistan's surrender to the Taliban, Biden again defended his decision.

"One more year, or five more years, of U.S. military presence would not have made a difference if the Afghan military cannot or will not hold its own country," Biden said in August 2021.

Biden was widely criticized over the withdrawal, and he deflected blame to President Trump.

"When I came to office, I inherited a deal cut by my predecessor—which he invited the Taliban to discuss at Camp David on the eve of 9/11 of 2019—that left the Taliban in the strongest position militarily since 2001 and imposed a May 1, 2021, deadline on U.S. forces," Biden said during an Aug. 2021 speech. "Shortly before he left office, he also drew U.S. forces down to a bare minimum of 2,500."

"Therefore, when I became President, I faced a choice—follow through on the deal, with a brief extension to get our forces and our allies' forces out safely, or ramp up our presence and send more American troops to fight once again in another country's civil conflict," he said.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Togo has a jihadi problem
SOURCE	https://intpolicydigest.org/togo-has-a-jihadi-problem/
GIST	<p>On May 13, the West African country of Togo experienced its first deadly terrorist attack. According to the government, jihadists killed eight soldiers and injured a number of others. If Togo is to face this threat, it must adopt democratic reforms.</p> <p>West Africa has become a sanctuary for various armed groups, such as Al Qaeda, Islamic State, and their affiliated groups. The Sahel region appears to be one of three main geographical areas of operation for terrorist groups on the African continent. According to the Global Terrorism Index 2022, the Sahel counts three – Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso – of the ten countries with the most significant increases in deaths from terrorism. Moreover, it has the world's fastest-growing terrorist organization, Nusrat al-Islam, and the world's most lethal terrorist group, the Islamic State of West Africa.</p> <p>Togo has largely been spared compared to its neighbors. The recent cross-border attack that killed Togolese soldiers last week occurred near the border with Burkina Faso. It was the second attack in the last six months. It is now undeniable that Togo is a clear target for groups operating in Burkina Faso. The recent attack should resonate with Togolese leaders as a warning and a call for action.</p> <p>This threat is an existential danger to Togo and its citizens. The time for declarations of good intentions must give way to concrete actions and measures. The fight against terrorist groups requires new strategies. Togo needs to increase its military and security expenditures, acquire modern equipment, create a national terrorism advisory system, and give special training to security personnel.</p>

It also requires cooperation with various partners, especially [ECOWAS](#), the [Accra Initiative](#), and France and other countries. However, close cooperation with the United States is critical. The U.S. has more resources, experience, highly efficient training capacity, and a strong commitment to fighting terrorism.

During his visit to Togo last year, U.S. Army Gen. [Stephen Townsend](#), commander of U.S. Africa Command, was open to establishing a partnership with Togo through more “focused bilateral training and assistance.” The partnership will give Togo valuable expertise in intelligence gathering, combat experience, special forces training, and the acquisition of modern security equipment.

Poor, and politically unstable, Togo is vulnerable to future attacks. Its border with Burkina Faso is less populated, extremely poor, and less developed, which makes it easier for raids by terrorist groups. Although the government has made improvements in infrastructure, transport, health care, and logistics, most of the population still lives on less than \$1.25 a day.

On the political side, President Faure Gnassingbé, who replaced his father in 2005, after 38 years in power, [has embraced authoritarianism](#). The opposition leader, Agbéyomé Kodjo, has accused the Togolese authorities of [widespread fraud](#). The opposition accused the government of fraud during the previous presidential elections and demanded the end of the ruling family dynasty that has been in place since 1967.

A divided and mismanaged nation will eventually fall apart. In this fight against jihadi terrorism, the Togolese government should adopt democratic reforms that can lead to national cohesion. The intimidation or imprisoning of journalists, politicians, and civil society groups whose views do not align with the government must stop. Democratic reforms will help create trust in the government and its actions to fight this threat.

The fight against terrorism is grueling and never-ending. West African countries must take the threat seriously. Togo will undoubtedly experience more attacks in the future. There is a critical need to work with countries like the United States who have experience combating jihadi groups in Africa. But importantly, the Biden administration will be reluctant to engage with Togo if the government continues to crack down on politicians, civil society groups, and journalists.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Radical Boko Haram recruiter surrenders?
SOURCE	https://saharareporters.com/2022/05/17/radical-boko-haram-preacher-and-terrorist-recruiter-ari-difinoma-reportedly-surrenders
GIST	<p>The leader of the Jama’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihad (JAS), popularly known as the Boko Haram terrorist group, Alhaji Ari-Difinoma, has reportedly surrendered to the Nigerian Army.</p> <p>Zagazola Makama, a counter-insurgency expert and security analyst in Lake Chad, reported that the radical preacher surrendered to the troops of 21 Special Armoured Brigade Bama, Operation Hadin Kai, on Monday, May 16, 2022, after he was forced out of his hideout following sustained bombardment by troops of Operation Hadin Kai.</p> <p>Daily Post also reports intensified infighting between Boko Haram and its rival faction, the Islamic State of the West African Province (ISWAP).</p> <p>Zagazola noted that ISWAP terrorists had launched a surprise attack against Boko Haram at Ukuba, a camp that had been repeatedly destroyed by the Nigerian troops but reoccupied by the terrorists, forcing Boko Haram fighters to flee.</p> <p>Sources told Zagazola that Ari-Difinoma and others ran to hide in a small village located in Mantari village, within the axis of Bama Local Government Area, but were forced out of their hideout by hunger and unending artillery bombardments by the Nigerian troops.</p> <p>“It was at that point that Mr Ari-Difinoma decided to abandon the rest of his colleagues and ran out to</p>

	surrender himself,” he said.
	Alhaji Ari-Difinoma, who is an indigene of Monguno in Borno State, ran one of the radicalisation schools in Ukuba camp in Sambisa Forest under the Darul-Qur’an. He has reportedly recruited many children and youths through his teaching of extremist ideologies in the past 10 years.
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HEADLINE	05/17 Guilty pleas Mich. terror probe: The Base
SOURCE	https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/members-of-neo-nazi-group-the-base-convicted-in-domestic-terrorism-probe-in-michigan
GIST	<p>LANSING, Mich. (FOX 2) - Four men with ties to a white supremacist group that advocates for violence against the government and has aspirations of creating a white ethno-state have pleaded guilty to gang membership and weapons charges.</p> <p>The convictions follow a years-long investigation into The Base, which has a loose network of cells around the U.S. That includes in Michigan, where members sought to establish training sites in preparation for what they describe as a coming race war.</p> <p>Two of the members convicted, including the suspected leader of the group Justen Watkins, had been arraigned on charges of being associated with a gang and using computers to commit a crime after they intimidated a family in Dexter in 2019.</p> <p>He was also charged with conspiring to train for a civil disorder, a first in Michigan's history.</p> <p>Following those charges, a wider investigation was launched with the FBI and Joint Terrorism Task Force, which uncovered plans by other members of The Base to assess Michigan prisons as potential paramilitary training grounds.</p> <p>"The pleas serve as an example of the FBI's continued commitment to work alongside its law enforcement partners at every level to protect the security of our nation—even when Federal criminal statutes may not be available," said James A. Tarasca, Special Agent in Charge at the FBI's Detroit Division.</p> <p>What is The Base?</p> <p>The Base is a small militant neo-Nazi organization that formed in 2018. According to the Anti-Defamation League, the group embraces "Hitlerian ideology coupled with a mission to prepare for an impending race war."</p> <p>The Base, which is the English translation of "Al-Qaeda" has largely operated in the virtual space, the ADL said. But actions by its members increasingly show a presence on the ground. Some of those actions have included criminal activity in recent years.</p> <p>"The group sees non-white people as enemies of the white race and envisions a coming race war, which will be sparked by 'non-European races,'" the ADL said.</p> <p>Criminal charges have been brought against members in Georgia, Wisconsin, and now Michigan.</p> <p>A white ethno-state in Michigan</p> <p>Among the states that The Base was most interested in operating out of was in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The region's population is largely white and, according to a report from Vice News in October 2020, was considered a potential place that members could conduct paramilitary training.</p> <p>Watkins, of Bad Axe in Michigan, who took over the group's leadership in 2020, had wanted to purchase land in the peninsula as part of plans to house and train members.</p>

According to a release from Attorney General Dana Nessel's office, two other members of the base not charged in the initial case had entered former and vacant Michigan Department of Corrections sites near the rural community of Caro.

They were assessing the properties as potential future training grounds for "hate camps" - a term The Base used to designate their training exercises.

Mistaken identity leads to arrest

Watkins and Alfred Gorman first appeared in the Michigan court system after a December 2019 incident when they targeted a house in Washtenaw County, which they alleged to be the home of an antifascist podcaster.

The men posted threatening images online, which included a photo of Watkins wearing tactical gear in front of the home.

But the house was wrongly identified and instead housed a family in Dexter.

Following their arrest, both men were charged with gang membership, unlawful posting of a message, and using a computer to commit a crime. The penalties ranged from two-year to four-year felonies, and fines of \$5,000.

Felony charge for planning civil disorder

After Watkins and Gorman's arrest, more evidence in the case broadened the investigation in Michigan. Federal agencies specializing in domestic terrorist groups were assigned to the investigation.

More charges were announced when the Tuscola County Prosecutor identified Thomas Denton and Tristan Webb as being members of The Base who were planning future training grounds for the group.

Both were charged along with Watkins with counts of larceny in a building, gang membership, conspiracy to train with firearms for a civil disorder, and felony firearm.

The third charge regarding training for civil disorder, a four-year felony, was the first time it had ever been used against a defendant in Michigan history, the AG's statement said.

Plea agreements

All four men pleaded guilty to respective charges.

Web, Denton, and Watkins all plead guilty conspiracy to train with firearms for a civil disorder, felony firearm and gang membership. Watkins faces two rounds of sentencing, one in Washtenaw County on June 13 and one in Tuscola County, which hasn't been set yet.

Denton was sentenced to between two and four years in prison. Webb has yet to be sentenced.

Gorman, the only individual charged in Washtenaw County and not Tuscola County was sentenced to four years probation.

"Securing these convictions on the conspiracy to train for civil disorder holds significance for many reasons," Nessel said. "They reiterate this office's commitment to protecting Michigan residents, they create a historic precedent in our state's court system, and they convey the real danger domestic terrorism poses here and around the country."

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HEADLINE	05/18 UK arrests 13yr-old boy in terror probe
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/boy-13-arrested-part-uk-counter-terrorism-investigation-2022-05-18/

GIST	<p>LONDON, May 18 (Reuters) - A 13-year-old boy has been arrested on suspicion of committing terrorism offences as part of an investigation into the sharing of extreme Islamist material online, British police said on Wednesday.</p> <p>The boy was arrested on Tuesday at an address in west London on suspicion of dissemination of terrorist material. He has since been released on police bail until a date in mid-June.</p> <p>"While it is still very rare for such a young person to be arrested for a terrorism offence, in recent times we have seen a worrying increase in the number of teenagers being drawn into terrorism," said Richard Smith, head of London police's Counter Terrorism Command.</p> <p>"This particular investigation remains ongoing, but more broadly, we work closely with a whole range of partners to try and protect and divert young, vulnerable people away from extremism and terrorism."</p> <p>In February last year, a boy who headed a neo-Nazi group and carried out his first offence aged just 13, was convicted of terrorism offences. Last July another 13-year-old was arrested and later admitted possessing information useful to a terrorist.</p> <p>Police have previously warned that young people, mainly boys in their early teens, were becoming self-radicalised online and then progressing to actually planning terrorist attacks.</p> <p>Return to Top</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Buffalo shooting 'straightforward terrorism'
SOURCE	https://www.courthousenews.com/straightforward-terrorism-biden-says-of-buffalo-shooting/
GIST	<p>(CN) — Grieving the loss of life in the aftermath of a mass shooting in Buffalo, New York, President Joe Biden delivered an emotional address on Tuesday in which he labeled the supermarket massacre a terrorist attack motivated by white supremacy.</p> <p>Speaking in Buffalo before community leaders, members of Congress and the families of the 10 victims killed during the weekend shooting, Biden described the lives of each person killed during the attack and took a long pause, holding back emotion, when telling the story of a father killed while buying a birthday cake for his son's third birthday.</p> <p>"Evil will not win, I promise you. Hate will not prevail," Biden said. "White supremacy will not have the last word. For evil did come to Buffalo, it has come to all too many places manifest in gunmen who massacred innocent people in the name of hateful and perverse ideology rooted in fear and racism."</p> <p>An 18-year-old white man is charged with opening fire and killing 10 people and injuring three others on Saturday at Tops Friendly Market, located in a predominantly Black neighborhood of Buffalo. Most of the victims of the mass shooting were Black, and several were elderly.</p> <p>Law enforcement have since uncovered that the accused shooter, Payton Gendron, revealed white supremacist beliefs in online posts and traveled to Buffalo from Conklin, New York, targeting the store because of the high population of Black residents who lived nearby.</p> <p>He posted online about a racist right-wing conspiracy known as "replacement theory," the idea that an increasing population of non-white people in the United States aims to replace and outnumber white people, posing a threat to white power and the white race. It's a belief oft described as fringe despite dating back to the early days of America when white people stoked fear about what it would mean for their monopoly on power if Black and non-white people gained freedoms such as emancipation, reproductive autonomy or the right to vote.</p> <p>The Department of Justice is investigating the shooting as a hate crime alongside the FBI.</p> <p>"What happened here is simple straightforward terrorism, terrorism, domestic terrorism — violence inflicted in the service of hate and the vicious thirst for power that defines one group of people being</p>

inherently inferior to any other group,” Biden said. “Hate, that through the media and politics, the internet, has radicalized angry, alienated and isolated individuals into falsely believing that they will be replaced — that’s the word — replaced, by the other.”

Biden called white supremacy “a poison” running through America and American politics.

“The ideology of white supremacy has no place in America,” Biden said. “Silence is complicity. We cannot remain silent.”

He called back to the [2017 white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia](#), in which a Nazi sympathizer drove his car into a crowd of people protesting the rally, killing one person and injuring dozens.

Biden has throughout his time in office and his initial presidential campaign pointed to the Charlottesville carnage as the moment that spurred his campaign for the White House. During his inaugural address, Biden called out white supremacy as a form of domestic terrorism, a message he repeated in Buffalo in front of a crowd of mourning community members.

While much of his speech focused on a full-throated condemnation of racially motivated violence, Biden made one policy call for gun reform, referencing the shooter’s use of an assault-style gun in the attack.

“This venom, this violence cannot be the story of our time, we cannot allow that to happen,” Biden said. “Look, I am not naive, I know tragedy will come again. It cannot be forever overcome. It cannot be fully understood either. But there are certain things we can do, we can keep assault weapons off our streets.”

Biden depicted the fight against white supremacy and racism as critical to not just ending racial violence, but to upholding American democracy.

“The American experiment in democracy is in danger like it hasn’t been in my lifetime. Hate and fear are being given too much oxygen by those who pretend to love America and don’t understand America,” Biden said. “These actions we’ve seen in these hate filled attacks represent the small and a hateful minority. We cannot allow them to distort the real America. We cannot allow them to destroy the soul of the nation.”

Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown spoke before Biden took to the stage. As the city’s first Black mayor, Brown spoke directly to the families of the victims: “We are here to wrap our arms around you,” he said. Biden echoed a similar message to the families of the victims.

“From your pain, may we find purpose to live a life worthy of the loved ones you lost,” Biden said.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Indonesia: militants pledged ISIS loyalty
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/militant-suspects-held-indonesia-pledged-islamic-state-loyalty-police-2022-05-17/
GIST	<p>AKARTA, May 17 (Reuters) - Members of a cohort of suspected extremists arrested in Indonesia at the weekend had made pledges of loyalty to Islamic State via an instant messaging application, the national police said on Tuesday.</p> <p>Indonesia's elite Densus 88 counter-terrorism taskforce arrested two dozen suspects during raids on Saturday and subsequent interviews revealed some had performed bayat, or a pledge of allegiance, to Islamic State's new leader, Abu al-Hassan al-hashemi al-Quraishi, police said.</p> <p>National police spokesperson Ahmad Ramadhan said 22 of the suspects were detained in central Sulawesi, an area with a long history of sectarian violence and extremism, and were linked to the East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT) network.</p>

	<p>They had assisted MIT by providing ammunition and concealing their activities, he told a news conference. The other two arrests were made on Java island and in Kalimantan.</p> <p>Members of the group performed bayat by reading a text message circulated on their WhatsApp messenger accounts, he added.</p> <p>As many as 1,100 men, women and children left Indonesia to join the Islamic State at the height of the group's control of territory in Syria and Iraq, according to Jakarta-based security expert Sidney Jones.</p> <p>Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, suffered its worst militant attack in 2002 when two nightclubs on the island of Bali were bombed, killing 202 people, mostly foreign tourists.</p> <p>The attacks were carried out by Jemaah Islamiyah, a militant group that later conducted bombings in the capital Jakarta.</p> <p>Analysts say the threat of extremist attacks has since diminished significantly and while arrests of suspected extremists do take place, pledges of allegiance to Islamic State have been rare.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Online radicalization: vulnerable people
SOURCE	https://www.newsnationnow.com/us-news/northeast/online-radicalization-vulnerable/
GIST	<p>(NewsNation) — The white man accused of shooting and killing 10 Black people Sunday during a racist attack in Buffalo, New York, allegedly wrote that his beliefs were formed online, where experts say radicalization efforts are strategic and pervasive.</p> <p>Regardless of the organization or belief, common threads tend to run through people who are radicalized online, according to Brian Hughes, associate director of the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab at American University in Washington, D.C.</p> <p>Those already craving power, connection or a place to unload their frustration might find the messaging of white supremacy and other extremist movements alluring. Often, however, promises of relief are never delivered and the surrogate families these groups tout don't last, Hughes said.</p> <p>"There is a fairly consistent profile of the type of person who's vulnerable to radicalization, but that profile also makes people vulnerable to other forms of antisocial behavior: drug and alcohol abuse, domestic or intimate partner abuse, gangs, criminal activity, stuff of that nature," Hughes said.</p> <p>"What the internet changed is that now it's impossible to avoid the kind of extremist ideology and culture and media of extremist groups," he continued.</p> <p>In Buffalo, authorities are investigating the attack on mostly Black shoppers and workers at the Tops Friendly Market as a potential federal hate crime or act of domestic terrorism. The gunman allegedly wrote that his racist beliefs grew when he was "bored" during the pandemic and frequented a website that's been largely criticized for housing racist and anti-Semitic posts from anonymous users.</p> <p>He also chose a predominantly Black neighborhood as the site of his attack and traveled about 200 miles from his home to carry it out, investigators said.</p> <p>It's that kind of aggression that some mistake for power, according to University of Maryland professor Arie Kruglanski.</p> <p>"The ideology is not why they're doing it," he said. "The ideology is the means for them to attain the significance that they crave."</p>

Put simply: They want to feel important. Other research shows that feelings of belonging, a duty to protect, or the sense of a larger purpose might also draw people in.

It's an explanation but not an excuse for beliefs that, in the end, tend to single out specific groups of people by baselessly identifying a "very clear and well-identified enemy," Hughes said. But any comfort someone might find in an extremist circle is short-lived, he added.

"If you speak with former extremists, what they tell you is that the feelings of hatred and isolation and alienation, and having been robbed of something that you deserve, just get worse and worse and worse, the more embedded in these worldviews that you become," Hughes said.

Although online platforms have made extremist propaganda more accessible, the internet isn't entirely to blame, Los Angeles clinical psychiatrist Teri Davis said. Oftentimes the seed of whatever extremist ideology a person is drawn to was [planted before they found a home for it online](#), she said.

"I would not put all of the responsibility online, no," Davis said. "I would say that social media has probably brought forth ideals that people had anyway and found a home for those ideals to be shared across the country or the world."

While conversations about funding and access to mental healthcare tend to follow acts of gun violence, policy change can only do so much, Davis said.

Instead, the conversations born from mass shootings should place more of an emphasis on basic coping skills and destigmatization, she said.

"If you're going to wait on a president, if you're going to wait on your congressman, if you're going to wait on your family members to solve these problems, you'll be waiting a long time," Davis said. "(Psychologists) say 'some of the stuff, I think you can solve.' But it's an internal fight and battle to do it."

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HEADLINE	05/18 DHS preparing for violence after Roe ruling
SOURCE	https://www.axios.com/2022/05/18/supreme-court-abortion-ro-eprotests-violence
GIST	<p>The U.S. government is bracing for a potential surge in political violence once the Supreme Court hands down the ruling that's expected to overturn Roe v. Wade, according to a Department of Homeland Security memo obtained by Axios.</p> <p>The big picture: Law enforcement agencies are investigating social-media threats to burn down or storm the Supreme Court building and murder justices and their clerks, as well as attacks targeting places of worship and abortion clinics.</p> <p>Details: The unclassified May 13 memo by DHS' intelligence arm says threats that followed the leak of a draft opinion — targeting Supreme Court Justices, lawmakers and other public officials, as well as clergy and health care providers — "are likely to persist and may increase leading up to and following the issuing of the Court's official ruling."</p> <p>Context: Abortion-related violence historically has been driven by anti-abortion extremists.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Some racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists' embrace of pro-life narratives may be linked to the perception of wanting to 'save white children' and 'fight white genocide,'" the memo also says.• But the memo warns that this time, extremist acts could come from abortion-rights proponents as well. <p>But, but, but: "The mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics does not constitute domestic violent extremism or illegal activity and is constitutionally protected."</p>

In response to a request for comment from Axios, a DHS spokesperson said the department “is committed to protecting Americans' freedom of speech and other civil rights and civil liberties, including the right to peacefully protest.

- "DHS is also committed to working with our partners across every level of government and the private sector to share timely information and intelligence, prevent all forms of violence, and to support law enforcement efforts to keep our communities safe.”

Between the lines: The Roe decision is flypaper for extremists. The memo, along with communications between government and the private sector, show how multiple agencies are mobilizing to try to get ahead of ahead of civil unrest.

- The mass shooting in Buffalo, N.Y., over the weekend has "complicated everything even more," said Jonathan Wackrow, a risk management consultant and a former special agent with the U.S. Secret Service.
- "The attack in Buffalo actually has a measured impact on this Roe decision and how people will react to it," he told Axios. "You see that people are willing to engage in the most violent acts in furtherance of that ideology."

Even before the Supreme Court leak, the Biden administration had made a focus of combatting domestic violent extremism. DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has called the issue one of the [greatest terrorism-related threats to the U.S.](#)

What's next: Across the country, regional fusion centers — state-level hubs for communicating threat-related information — are sounding the alarm.

- One memo from a Nevada counterterrorism agency raised concerns about the potential impact of the court decision on the the 2022 midterm elections, and safety of election workers.
- A [similar Virginia fusion center document](#) flags the possibility of doxing and cyber attacks on abortion facilities, as well as violence from non-abortion-related extremists.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Extremist ideologies are morphing
SOURCE	https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/05/17/elizabeth-neumann-q-a-extremists-00033140
GIST	<p>On Saturday, an 18-year-old man traveled from Conklin, New York, to Buffalo, where he shot and killed 10 Black people at a grocery store. The following day, a Chinese-born Las Vegas man traveled to an Orange County, California, church to kill Taiwanese people. For Americans watching two ethnically motivated attacks in one weekend, it was hard to avoid the sensation that a problem that had been slowly gathering for years was quickly spiraling out of control.</p> <p>Is it?</p> <p>To find out, I spoke with Elizabeth Neumann, a former Department of Homeland Security official under former President Donald Trump. Previously, she served on the Homeland Security Council under George W. Bush. Neumann left DHS in April 2020 and is currently chief strategy officer at Moonshot, a company that develops new technology and methodologies to combat online harms, including radicalization. And she says, yes, there are more radicalized people than ever before, and there are reasons for it we need to pay more attention to.</p> <p>“It’s kind of like a weather warning,” she said. “What extremist researchers are saying is, ‘The conditions are ripe for violence,’ because of all of these factors are at play in a volatile environment.”</p> <p>Among those factors: Increasing globalization creates uncertainty that makes people everywhere more vulnerable to hateful arguments and the solutions presented by those arguments. Politicians and public figures, particularly on the right in the United States, play a key role, too. Even if they are motivated by getting more viewers or winning elections, Neumann says, “They know what they’re doing. They’re choosing to ignore it, or they think they can get away with it.”</p>

We also touched on solutions. The fact that there are solutions, and there appear to have been solutions that would have worked in the Buffalo shooter's case, makes her hopeful, she said.

"But on the other hand," she said, "it makes me very sad that there weren't resources in place to be able to run those interventions in this case."

This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Katelyn Fossett: Would you consider the Buffalo shooter a Christian extremist?

Elizabeth Neumann: According to his manifesto — all the caveats apply: He's presenting to the world what he wants the world to see, so until the investigation is done, I don't know that we have a fully accurate picture. But what he mentioned in the manifesto was that he is not a Christian. And he clarified that what he meant was that he did not believe there was a need for salvation; he did not believe in salvation by faith; and he doesn't believe in an afterlife. Even the phrase "salvation by faith" tells me he's been exposed to Christian teaching, because that's almost a direct quote out of the New Testament.

But then he goes on and says he agrees with Christian values. And that's the piece that's fascinating for those who are studying Christian nationalism. There are people today who walk into the voting booth, and when they are asked what their religious affiliation is, they will say Christian, not because they have put their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but because culturally, that is who they spend time with and that's what they're most comfortable with. It's more an identity label and less an actual religion or faith.

There are aspects of Christian nationalism where the people who are Christian nationalist might not even consider themselves Christian, like this guy, but strongly want the country to maintain its association with those values. This guy's primary thrust was an ethnonationalist viewpoint that the United States belongs to white people and white Europeans, and there is an evil conspiracy coordinated by the Jews to get rid of white people through a combination of low birth rates and having immigrants come in and have higher birth rates.

There are lots of strains in this conspiracy theory that can go in a lot of different directions, but his main point was that we are going to lose the white race and America should be white; and he's fighting back to save his culture, and he sees his culture as inherently Christian or having Christian values. So that's getting close to Christian nationalism in that a Christian nationalist also has a belief that America was founded as a Christian nation, but there's a bit more religion [in Christian nationalism]. Strong Christian nationalists will tell you that in order for America to maintain its blessing from God, we must be a moral nation. We are no longer a moral nation; we need to fight back and preserve morality; we need to institute morals into our laws, otherwise the Lord is going to remove his blessing and we will no longer be a Christian nation.

There are variations on Christian nationalism. It's not like somebody is the owner of the ideology and says, "No, no, it's only one thing." You could walk into one church and go like, "Oh, this is Christian nationalist." And then you could walk into a country club where they're not talking about religious things at all, and it can also seem Christian nationalist. It's more about the cultural identity of Christian values being forced into our lives, and the motive might be a little different. In this case, the guy is thinking of it through a very cultural lens — an ethnonationalist viewpoint of "I want to preserve white culture, and white culture is inherently Christian," in his mind. Perhaps another person who is a Christian nationalist — it might not at all, at least on its face, have anything to do with race, and it's just, "I just wanted God's blessing on my country, and we need to force Christian morals on the country."

Fossett: It seems like these extremist ideologies are melding together. Is that something you're observing with some of these ideologies, which appear to be increasingly motivating attacks like these?

Neumann: There is a recognized phenomenon within the past five years or so of an extremist or attacker picking or choosing their ideology across things that might seem to contradict one another. The FBI calls it "salad-bar ideology." You know, "I want a little bit of eco-fascism, I want a little bit of racism, I'm also anti-Semitic." And sometimes there are carve-outs for why this one thing is OK, but this one thing isn't. It's very much like choose-your-own-extremist-ideology. It's increasingly narrowed down, like everything that is marketed to us now — you can get very particular about the way you want something, and the

internet has allowed us to personalize the extremist ideology. So that is a very real thing that we have noticed in increasing levels over the past five or six years.

The other piece of your question is about how and why motivations for these killings are changing. Eleven years ago, you have the attacker in Norway who killed 77 kids basically in the name of replacement theory ideology. He was the modern instantiation of the conspiracy theory that has been around in some form or fashion for decades — or even centuries or millennia, because it all comes back to being anti-Semitic.

From that moment in 2011, we start to see a series of attacks globally — Christchurch being one of the biggest ones. This is not just the U.S. and Europe; this is all over the world, where white people are saying “We’re better,” and they’re pushing back on what they see as an encroachment on the white way of life. One of the factors to this seeming to have caught wind is some very real demographic changes. We’re increasingly globalized, we’re increasingly transnational, and immigration from the global south to the global north has increased dramatically over the past 10 years and is expected to continue to increase. There are very real factors, and we also have institutions that are not well-equipped to adjust to these very fast changes that we’re all experiencing.

There are very real demographic changes; there are very real technological changes and jobs getting shipped overseas. And that creates opportunity for grievance — real grievance. If you lose your job because a factory overseas can do it cheaper, that hurts. That hurts your self-confidence and your sense of well-being, and it creates uncertainty. Uncertainty [about this upheaval] is one of those key factors that researchers have found common among people who join extremist movements. When you have uncertainty, you are open to being told the reasons for your crises and uncertainties and solutions for those uncertainties that involve violence toward the person who is scapegoated for your problems. Today, in 2022, we’re seeing much more of it. It’s not surprising because there has just been a lot of change.

If you bring it back to the U.S., and take some of the societal changes out of it and look at the Christian community, they have gone through — on one end of the spectrum, we had George W. Bush as president, and then, by 2015, gay marriage is legalized, and they start to see people owning businesses getting taken to court for their refusal to provide services for a gay wedding. And very quickly, you get to narratives around, “They’re criminalizing Christianity.” I remember personally hearing sermons like, “In my lifetime, I as a pastor am likely to be jailed. Your children might not be able to hear an orthodox teaching of the Bible.” This fear really set in that the Christian experience that most have had their entire life is not something that their grandchildren are going to enjoy. I hear that all the time when I go home: that the world is changing so fast ... that creates a lot of fear, and that fear, in an election year, is used to get votes and raise money. And for some, it gets used to suggest that violence might be necessary. So much so that, flash forward to polls in late 2021, that found that — depending on the poll — [30-40 percent of white evangelicals](#) believe they might need to take up arms to defend the country they love.

[They think], “The government has failed. I need to go restore liberty.” Of course, one of the motivations behind January 6 is a wrong belief in the election being stolen, and they thought that [the insurrection] was the right thing to do to save your country.

When you have such rapid change, and you have uncertainty, and you have monetization factors like political candidates and media magnets that make money off fear, you’re creating the soup, the toxic soup, that makes people vulnerable. And then it doesn’t take much for a threat actor to come in and cultivate extremist thoughts and move people to actual hostile action. And maybe that’s not terrorism; maybe it’s harassing threats at a school board meeting. That’s still a hostile action. That’s still, according to [terrorism researcher] J.M. Berger’s definition of extremism, which is any time an in-group believes an out-group poses a threat to you or to the in-group’s success or survival. And they think that hostile action is necessary. Hostile action can be bullying, it can be intimidation, it can be hate crimes. It can be terrorism. It can be war. There’s the whole spectrum of it. But the moment that you’re intimidating and bullying, or crossing into a hate crime realm, that’s still extremism.

Not everybody takes that next step, commits an act of violence and actually harms people. But it’s a path. And even with as much research as we have and what we understand about attackers and people that get

radicalized and become extremist, it's still impossible to predict if you have a pool of 100 people that meet that extremist definition, which one of them is going to go actually commit the attack? We don't know.

So any time you have a large pool of people that have been radicalized — and I would argue that today we have a lot more in the country than we've ever had before — it makes it extremely difficult to know who you need to actually have your eyes on because they're the one that is going to commit the attack. There are just too many.

Fossett: What role have politicians played in the Buffalo shooting and other attacks like it?

Neumann: So it is fairly clear from the Buffalo attacker's manifesto — again, we don't know the full investigation yet — he does not seem to have been radicalized through mainstream mechanisms. So I want to make sure that caveat is there before I say the this next piece.

That said, we have a whole host of people who are routinely spending time discussing and being angry about and talking in coded language — whether they actually understand the code or not — around ideas that for a long time were on the fringe and would not have been discussed in the mainstream. Very common phrase used among extremist researchers is “The extreme has gone mainstream.” It is just kind of normal these days to hear in conservative Republican circles this idea of, “Well, they're trying to bring in the immigrants to replace the conservatives, the Republicans, the real Americans. They're trying to make them all Democrat voters.” And so there's a part of that that's like: OK, so you're making an assertion that if you bring 100 people in that are immigrants, that you think 55 percent of them are going to be Democrats over the 45 percent that might be Republicans. Maybe you're genuinely just trying to talk about the ability for you to maintain political power. Maybe that's all you mean. But there are other voices that go the next step and start demonizing the immigrant. They use language that makes the immigrants seem less than human, including comparing them to rodents or animals or saying they're dirty or less than human. And anytime you start seeing that kind of language, it really alarms extremist researchers, because that's an important step before somebody commits violence.

Human beings are created not to kill one another. In order to get your mind to a place where you're OK with killing somebody, you have to make them less than human in your mind. And when you start having voices making those arguments for you on TV, and politicians, the impact it has on the conversation and the ideas that are circulating in conservative and Republican circles is it's starting to change people's minds about certain people and demographic groups. That happens even if the motives of those politicians and the people on TV are making money or getting viewers. Maybe they don't actually believe it. I think that's in large the case for television guys.

And it's not just racially based. It's also about “those people on the coasts,” and “They don't understand us. They're extreme.” So it's anytime you're saying, “I'm this way and those other people don't get me; those other people are evil.”

And when you're talking about a country of 330 million, yeah, most people are not going to go commit an act of violence; it's a small percentage. But a small percentage is a lot of people. It's a lot of violence.

So I think the concern of the last five to seven years is rapid change, great uncertainty, voices in leadership — including at one point the president of the United States — dehumanizing their opponents and bringing into the mainstream political dialogue conversations or phrases or ideas that had in the past been shunned as hateful, as racist, as conspiracy-laden and not true. Now they're welcomed and talked about, and that's creating the circumstances from which the violence can occur. It's kind of like a weather warning. The conditions are ripe for a tornado or for a hurricane to form. What extremist researchers are saying is, “The conditions are ripe for violence,” because of all of these factors are at play in a volatile environment. And we just went through Covid — talk about the height of height of uncertainty and fear. That was a really scary time for a lot of people. They lost jobs. They lost loved ones. All of those are known contributors for creating uncertainty and making people more susceptible to extremist thoughts.

There are more radicalized people right now, and there are a lot of reasons for it, but certainly leadership on the right is complicit. At this point, they know what they're doing. They're choosing to ignore it, or

they think they can get away with it. Especially after 2019, when you have the president's campaign slogan end up in a terrorist manifesto and it's plastered all over the *New York Times* a couple of days later ... You might not want to believe it. You might not want to believe that evil people might be inspired by politicians, but it's just the height of irresponsibility for you to have not been aware of it. And so those that are continuing it, I think they have a lot of accountability for some of the deaths that we've seen.

Fossett: What do you think politicians should do when something like this happens? Especially Republican politicians who want to make sure they're not encouraging this?

Neumann: I loved [Liz Cheney's statement](#) that she put out calling on Republicans and conservatives to denounce white supremacy and to denounce replacement theory. It's one thing for somebody on the left to do that, or for people that like myself who are constantly trying to warn about this. At some point, people are like, "Yeah, yeah, you said this before." It really would be quite something if you had House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy come out and say, "I should've done this earlier, but I really realize how damaging this kind of language can be. And it was never my intent. But I own the fact that I am the leader of the Republican Party, and there are members in our ranks that are dabbling in ... and some of them are hanging out at white nationalist rallies. And we're going to take this seriously and we're going to hold our members accountable for making sure that they do not promote hate. Violence is not the way that we solve our disagreements. We can disagree with one another and still treat one another like human beings."

Something along those lines: acknowledging that you haven't done enough to this point and vehemently condemning white supremacy, white nationalism, racism, hate crimes, all of that. And condemning not just the attacker, but the ideology behind it. And then committing to holding their party members accountable.

That would be different than what we usually see, which is, you know, "This is a horrific act," and "We condemn the act." Of course, everybody condemns the act. But do you condemn the ideas behind the act? Do you condemn the fact that [Fox News host] Tucker Carlson has been talking about this and did a special on this idea of replacement theory, and that is creating the fear factor that is driving people to go look deeper? It's an on-ramp to being radicalized. That doesn't mean that Carlson did the radicalization himself, but it's irresponsible for him to create the conditions that lead people to go and search for these dark channels of the internet where they become radicalized.

I think you can be a conservative without having to cater to white supremacists and white nationalists and those conspiracy theories.

Now we've had several attacks. Language coming out of the political right is showing up in those manifestos. And you've got to denounce it and you have to denounce it hard, over and over and over again. It would be really powerful if they could do that.

Fossett: Given your expertise and research, and looking at the Buffalo attacker's background, where do you think are the hinge points in his story where someone could have intervened and stopped this?

Neumann: We're starting to see more about the attacker's interactions with law enforcement. There were signs of disturbing behavior in the last year. It does seem like there were probably points along his journey that where intervention could have worked, and he could have been off-ramped and this could have been avoided. That makes me hopeful that maybe we can do that before the next attack happens, but on the other hand, it makes me very sad that there weren't resources in place to be able to run those interventions in this case.

We have some really strong evidence about why and how people radicalize and what can be done at various stages on those journeys to both build resilience in people that are vulnerable and and that are on radicalization pathways. When I was at DHS, we were studying this. We actually asked Rand to do a study for us. They came back with a number of recommendations that we adopted. We were able to secure funding, which is kind of like one of the bright spots in the Trump administration in the story of otherwise ignoring domestic terrorism. And it was largely due to three secretaries who were committed to trying to address domestic terrorism, even if the White House didn't care. We created what is now called the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships. We put people in the field to start building out prevention

capability, restarted a grant program, increased its funding, and we went from \$3 million to \$30 million [in funding]. So that's the good news.

The Biden administration came in and improved the concept, in part because it was based on a pilot from the Obama years. It had just been updated based on the latest information and latest evidence. And they wrote their domestic terrorism strategy, which is great. And then they haven't funded it. It's stayed flat. So we're currently spending \$30 million on prevention. That's non-law-enforcement prevention.

Back in 2016 and 2017, there were three or four different think tanks that were looking at prevention funding. And the recommendations range from, on one end, that the U.S. should be spending \$150 million to \$250 million a year. One recommendation was all the way up to \$1 billion a year for both international and domestic prevention programs. So before we had January 6, before Covid, before the conspiracy theories around elections, we're seeing recommendations to spend \$250 million to \$1 billion on prevention. Now, I would say we have an even bigger problem, and we're still spending \$30 million.

I do think we could be doing a lot more. We can design prevention programs that come alongside vulnerable individuals and people that are in radicalization pathways and intervene with them. We can do it offline. We can do it online. I work for Moonshot, which is a company that does online interventions to try to meet people where they are. They're finding the radicalizing material and trying to either move them to safer content online or move them to offline psychosocial support. Because what we found is that sometimes the people searching for the most harmful content online are very open to empathic messages that meet the underlying need that is driving them. They tend to be angry. They tend to be lonely. They tend to be frustrated. And if you approach them with, "Hey, would you like to talk to somebody?" we actually end up with quite a few people who were searching for violent extremist content who are willing to go and talk to somebody.

So there's evidence that this works. It's just not scaled to the pattern that we have. I have hope, but I really need Washington, D.C. to do what it should do, which is authorize things, push the money out and then get out of the way and let the local communities build these capabilities out.

Because we do need to have the resources for parents and schoolteachers and coaches and loved ones to be able to call when they see somebody going down a dark path. They don't want to call 911. And even if law enforcement shows up, law enforcement can't do something with somebody who's just ideating or spouting off hate messages. They're protected under the First Amendment; they can have their hateful ideas. That doesn't mean they don't need help. It doesn't mean that they aren't safe. And we need to be able to offer an alternative to families and loved ones so that they don't have to endure these attacks anymore.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Taliban push Afghan women out of work
SOURCE	https://time.com/6177133/afghan-women-workforce-challenges-taliban/
GIST	<p>Afghan teacher Masuma is used to having her clothing scrutinized. The girls' school where she works—among a minority to have reopened after most girls' secondary schools were closed when the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan last year—has long required her to wear a uniform consisting of a dark, ankle-length dress, and a black headscarf.</p> <p>But in recent weeks, the pressure has grown. On a hot late spring day in April, the school supervisor told Masuma her uniform did not comply with the Taliban's latest guidance, which advised that women cover their faces in public. Despite the heat, he said, she should be wearing gloves and a burqa, the flowing garment that covers the entire head and face. When she told him she had a respiratory condition that meant she could not cover her face, he said she should watch out for "Vice and Virtue"—the ministry notorious for its often violent enforcement of such restrictions. "Don't say I didn't warn you," she recalls him saying.</p> <p>So when the Taliban issued a ruling on May 7 that all Afghan women should cover their faces in public, Masuma was defiant, but not surprised. Two of her colleagues had already been fired for failing to follow</p>

the dress code. Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in April that the Taliban had [threatened to close girls' secondary schools in Balkh province](#)—one of only a few provinces where they had been able to remain open—if female students and staff did not take heed.

Masuma, whose full name has been withheld for her protection, is among a small cohort of Afghan women who had been allowed to keep their jobs after the Taliban seized control in August. These women—teachers, government employees, and aid workers—were kept on because their jobs required them to have contact with women and girls, so could not be done by a man. Yet even they now find their ability to work squeezed by the growing restrictions, placed on everything from what they wear to how they travel. “We cannot accept this,” says Masuma, 34, speaking by phone from Balkh’s provincial capital, Mazar-i-Sharif.

Many Afghan women don’t just want to work; they need to as the sole breadwinners in their families. Unemployment [is high](#) and decades of war have left Afghanistan with hundreds of thousands of widows.

Now, the [space for Afghan women](#) to work is disappearing fast. In addition to effectively mandating the burqa in public, the latest decree advised that the “first and best sign of observing hijab is not to leave the house.” If a woman does need to leave, she should obey the dress code and in some parts of the country, be accompanied by male relatives.. Already, many female government workers have been barred from their offices and told to come in [only to collect their paychecks](#). Now, women say they are being told they will be fired if they do not comply with the latest recommendations.

“We have to fight back. I’m not covering my face and I have no intention of doing so. I just hope I won’t get fired,” Masuma says. “We’ll try to fight this even though we are tired, we’re exhausted. I’ve worked outside my home for 16 years... But [the Taliban] are treating us as though we don’t know anything.”

In a cruel twist, the decree makes women’s male relatives responsible for ensuring they comply—or face fines or jail time if they don’t. Women’s rights activists have warned that placing the onus on *Mahram*, or male “guardians,” could exacerbate domestic violence in a country where it’s already widespread. [Nine out of 10 women](#) in Afghanistan experience at least one form of domestic violence, according to the United Nations.

Heather Barr, associate women’s rights director at HRW, called the Taliban’s decree an “alarming escalation” and said the threat to punish male relatives removed what little power women had left to make decisions for themselves.

“A lot of the media coverage has focused on the restrictions on clothing and women have to cover their faces... What is actually more serious is that the Taliban has said that women shouldn’t be leaving their house unless they really need to and have a specific reason to,” she said in a WhatsApp voice message.

Many of the working women interviewed for this story see the Taliban’s latest decree as part of a wider campaign to pressure them to stop work. In March, the regime made [a last-minute U-turn on secondary education for girls](#), announcing on the day schools were due to reopen that they would remain shut indefinitely. Months before that, the Taliban ruled that women traveling long distances must be accompanied by a male guardian. Working women said local Taliban officials were enforcing this rule even for shorter distances, making it virtually impossible for them to travel to work.

The Taliban did not respond to repeated requests for comment on this story. Akif Muhajir, spokesman for the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, has [previously defended](#) such restrictions—saying they aimed to protect women’s honor.

Samar, an elementary school teacher in northern Afghanistan, recalls being stopped at three separate Taliban checkpoints during one journey and asked why she had no *Mahram* with her. She had been traveling with three other women, one of whom had her father with her, but they were told they each needed their own male chaperone. (Out of safety concerns, Samar asked to use a pseudonym.)

“They stopped the car and questioned each of us individually,” says Samar, 25, who is the sole breadwinner in her family of 11. Her father has been unable to travel with her as he is trying to find a job.

The United Nations warned on May 9 that [restrictions on women](#) were preventing them from working and exacerbating Afghanistan’s dire economic problems, which have left more than half the country in need of humanitarian assistance.

Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost since the Taliban takeover last August, with women particularly hard hit, [the U.N.’s International Labor Organization estimates](#). Women’s participation in the workforce reached a high of about 22% just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, after a decade of steady gains. Since then, it has been falling steadily—first as a result of the pandemic, then the Taliban takeover.

While the Taliban’s labor ministry declined to provide any data on the current situation, the ILO [estimated](#) on Jan. 19 that women’s participation had decreased by 16% in the third quarter of 2021.

The effects are far-reaching. More than half the people in Afghanistan who are struggling to get enough to eat are women and girls, [according to the World Food Programme](#), with 85% of female-headed households resorting to drastic measures to feed their families, compared to 62% for male-headed households.

When Afghan aid worker Bahar (who also asked to use a pseudonym) started her current job in the central province of Ghor in January, the 25-year-old was told she should wear her burqa at all times—even when at her desk in a gender-segregated office. When she asked why, Bahar was told it was because men might pass by their office window. “The Taliban don’t like women working in the offices, and that is why they are always rude and disrespectful to female employees,” she says. “They don’t even look at us; they only look at our feet.”

During the two decades since the last Taliban regime fell in 2001, thousands of women trained as police officers. Only a handful remain in the force. One 33-year-old female officer who works at Kabul airport, where she does security checks on female passengers, says she now fears losing her job. “Everybody knows that the Taliban are against women working,” says the woman, who asked to remain anonymous. “We go to work with fear, and we come back home with fear.”

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HEADLINE	05/17 Review: no violations of law Syria airstrike
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/review-finds-us-troops-didnt-violate-law-in-syria-airstrike/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — A U.S. military investigation found that American troops did not violate the law of war or deliberately cause civilian casualties in a 2019 airstrike in Syria that killed dozens of people, including women and children. It did find that the military committed procedural mistakes in the aftermath of the attack.</p> <p>The Pentagon said Tuesday that no one, including the ground force commander, was disciplined as a result of the strike, which was launched in support of Syrian partner forces who were under heavy fire from the Islamic State group near the town of Baghuz, in eastern Syria,</p> <p>Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who ordered a new review of the airstrike last November, said he was “disappointed” with deficiencies in the handling of the initial review of the operation, which missed deadlines and led to delays in reporting to Congress and the public about civilian casualties.</p> <p>“The process contributed to a perception that the Department was not committed to transparency and was not taking the incident seriously – a perception that could have been prevented by a timely review and a clear explication of the circumstances surrounding the strike,” Austin said in a memo released Tuesday.</p> <p>The investigation comes amid new scrutiny on the U.S. military for strikes that cause innocent deaths. And it has all prompted Austin to order the department to create a new “Civilian Harm Mitigation and</p>

Response Action Plan” to better prevent civilian deaths in military operations. He also ordered Army Gen. Michael Garrett, currently the head of U.S. Army Forces Command, to do an independent review of the Baghuz strike.

Late last year, another independent review concluded that a U.S. drone strike that killed innocent Kabul civilians and children in the final days of the Afghanistan war was not caused by misconduct or negligence. It found breakdowns in communication and in the process of identifying and confirming the target of the bombing.

The strike killed a longtime employee of an American humanitarian organization and nine of his family members, including seven children. The U.S. has promised to pay financial reparations to the family, and potentially get them out of Afghanistan, but none of that has happened yet.

In the Tuesday memo, Austin directed department leaders to meet deadlines in reporting civilian casualties, conduct thorough reviews, and reinforce the importance of the procedures to commanders across the force.

The initial investigation into the attack concluded that the strike constituted legitimate self-defense in support of Syrian partner forces under fire from the Islamic State group. Garrett, in his investigation, agreed with that conclusion.

According to Garrett’s investigation, 52 enemy combatants were killed and two were injured, and four civilians were killed and 15 were injured. Of the civilians, one female and three children were killed, and 11 women and four children were wounded. One of the enemies killed was a child.

Asked why no one was being held personally accountable for the civilian deaths, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Tuesday that Austin was holding the department accountable, and that’s why he ordered changes in the process.

“I understand the questions about accountability, I get it,” Kirby told Pentagon reporters. “In this case, Gen. Garrett found that the ground force commander made the best decisions that he could, given the information he had at the time, given a very lethal, very aggressive (Islamic State) threat, in a very confined space. It is deeply regrettable ... we apologize for the loss of innocent life.”

Garrett, in an unclassified summary of his report, said that the ground force commander “did not deliberately or with wanton disregard cause civilian casualties.” He said the decision to strike was necessary to defend the Syrian Democratic Forces and that “multiple efforts to distinguish civilians” from Islamic State insurgents were made.

Garrett added, however, that information not available to the commander at the time, showed that he relied on data “that was not fully accurate.” But he said the commander’s actions can’t be judged on information available only in hindsight.

Garrett, in his review, also said that while he found problems with policy compliance, “I found no evidence to support the allegation that these deficiencies were malicious or made to conceal decisions or actions.”

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HEADLINE	05/17 Threat: right-wing extremist violence
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/briefing/right-wing-mass-shootings.html
GIST	<p>Over the past decade, the Anti-Defamation League has counted about 450 U.S. murders committed by political extremists.</p> <p>Of these 450 killings, right-wing extremists committed about 75 percent. Islamic extremists were responsible for about 20 percent, and left-wing extremists were responsible for 4 percent.</p>

Nearly half of the murders were specifically tied to white supremacists:

As this data shows, the American political right has a violence problem that has no equivalent on the left. And [the 10 victims in Buffalo this past weekend](#) are now part of this toll. “Right-wing extremist violence is our biggest threat,” Jonathan Greenblatt, the head of the ADL, has written. “The numbers don’t lie.”

The pattern extends to violence less severe than murder, like the Jan. 6 attack on Congress. It also extends to the language from some Republican politicians — including Donald Trump — and conservative media figures that treats violence as a legitimate form of political expression. A much larger number of Republican officials do not use this language but also do not denounce it or punish politicians who do use it; Kevin McCarthy, the top House Republican, [is a leading example](#).

It’s important to emphasize that [not all](#) extremist violence comes from the right — and that the precise explanation for any one attack can be murky, involving a mixture of ideology, mental illness, gun access and more. In the immediate aftermath of an attack, people are sometimes too quick to claim a direct cause and effect. But [it is also incorrect](#) to pretend that right-wing violence and left-wing violence are equivalent problems.

Fears in Washington

If you talk to members of Congress and their aides these days — especially off the record — you will often hear them mention [their fears of violence](#) being committed against them.

Some Republican members of Congress have said that they were reluctant to vote for Trump’s impeachment or conviction partly because of the threats against other members who had already denounced him. House Republicans who voted for President Biden’s infrastructure bill also [received threats](#). Democrats say their offices receive a spike in phone calls and online messages threatening violence after they are criticized on conservative social media or cable television shows.

People who oversee elections report similar problems. “One in six election officials have experienced threats because of their job,” the Brennan Center, a research group, [reported](#) this year. “Ranging from death threats that name officials’ young children to racist and gendered harassment, these attacks have forced election officials across the country to take steps like hiring personal security, fleeing their homes, and putting their children into counseling.”

There is often overlap between these violent threats and white supremacist beliefs. White supremacy tends to treat people of color as un-American or even less than fully human, views that can make violence seem justifiable. The suspect in the Buffalo massacre evidently posted an online manifesto that discussed [replacement theory](#), a racial conspiracy theory that Tucker Carlson promotes on his Fox News show.

[\(This Times story](#) examines how replacement theory has entered the Republican mainstream.)

“History has taught us that what begins with words ends in far worse,” Representative Liz Cheney, one of the few Republicans who have repeatedly and consistently denounced violence and talk of violence from the right, [wrote on Twitter yesterday](#). “The House GOP leadership has enabled white nationalism, white supremacy, and antisemitism,” Cheney wrote, and called on Republican leaders to “renounce and reject these views and those who hold them.”

A few other Republicans, [like Senator Mitt Romney](#), have taken a similar stance. But many other prominent Republicans have taken a more neutral stance or even embraced talk of violence.

Some have spoken openly about violence as a legitimate political tool — and not just Trump, who has done so [frequently](#).

	<p>At the rally that preceded the Jan. 6 attack, Representative Mo Brooks suggested the crowd should “start taking down names and kicking ass.” Before she was elected to Congress, Marjorie Taylor Greene supported the idea of executing Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi and other top Democrats. Representative Paul Gosar once posted an animated video altered to depict himself killing Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and swinging swords at Biden.</p> <p>Rick Perry, a former Texas governor, once called the Federal Reserve “treasonous” and talked about treating its chairman “pretty ugly.” During Greg Gianforte’s campaign for Montana’s House seat, he went so far as to assault a reporter who asked him a question he didn’t like; Gianforte won and has since become Montana’s governor.</p> <p>These Republicans have received no meaningful sanction from their party. McCarthy, the Republican leader in the House, has been especially solicitous of Brooks and other members who use violent imagery.</p> <p>This Republican comfort with violence is new. Republican leaders from past decades, like Ronald Reagan, Bob Dole, Howard Baker and the Bushes, did not evoke violence.</p> <p>“In a stable democracy,” Steven Levitsky, a Harvard political scientist, told me, “politicians unambiguously reject violence and unambiguously expel from their ranks antidemocratic forces.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 DHS: rise abortion-related violent threats
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/abortion-related-violent-threats-department-of-homeland-security-warning-supreme-court-draft-opinion-leak/
GIST	<p>In the wake of the Supreme Court's majority draft opinion leak, the U.S. Supreme Court Police reported a "significant increase in violent threats," including a series of social media posts directed at certain sitting justices as well as the Supreme Court building. The Department of Homeland Security said it has registered an uptick in threats against "reproductive healthcare personnel and facilities."</p> <p>The threats were outlined in an intelligence bulletin the DHS issued to state and local law enforcement agencies nationwide. The memo, titled "Potential for Threats to Public Safety in Response to Abortion Debate" and dated May 13, was published by DHS' Office of Intelligence and Analysis.</p> <p>The DHS said federal law enforcement agencies have opened investigations into several of the online threats.</p> <p>The National Capital Region Threat Intelligence Consortium — the Washington, D.C., regional intelligence hub charged with tracking domestic terrorism threats — has referred at least 25 violent online posts to partner agencies for further investigation. According to the bulletin, some of the social media threats discussed "burning down or storming the U.S. Supreme Court and murdering Justices and their clerks, members of Congress, and lawful demonstrators."</p> <p>The bulletin warned of an emerging "threat to government, religious, and reproductive healthcare personnel and facilities and ideological opponents" and marks the first intelligence bulletin explicitly issued to state and local law enforcement regarding abortion-related extremism in the wake of the opinion draft leak.</p> <p>"The volume of violent threats targeting Supreme Court Justices, members of Congress, other public officials, clergy, healthcare officials and providers, and others associated with the abortion debate are likely to persist and may increase leading up to and following the issuing of the Court's official ruling," the bulletin added.</p> <p>The Supreme Court is expected to issue its final ruling on the Mississippi abortion case next month.</p>

Since July 2021, at least four incidents of violence occurred between "ideological opponents" at abortion-related protests in Oregon and California, where demonstrators deployed "smoke grenades, paintball guns, batons, chemical irritants, and bats, according to press reporting," the memo reads.

Historically, a Justice Department task force has registered at least 10 murders committed by pro-abortion violent extremists, as well as dozens of bombings and arsons, all targeting abortion providers and facilities. However, the Supreme Court leak could lead to threats from both pro and anti-abortion supporters.

The DHS' Office of Intelligence and Analysis said in its bulletin that "grievances related to restricting abortion access could fuel violence by pro-choice abortion-related violent extremists and other [domestic violent extremists.]"

Arson investigators are looking into a fire that broke out inside the headquarters of anti-abortion group Wisconsin Family Action on May 8. Graffiti found at the scene read, "If abortions aren't safe [then] you aren't either" and included symbols "typically used by anarchist violent extremists and others to convey anti-law enforcement sentiment," according to the DHS' Office of Intelligence and Analysis.

Law enforcement officials are still working with fire department officials to determine an exact cause.

In the wake of the Supreme Court draft opinion leak, federal law enforcement agencies have identified threats as linked to racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism — the deadliest form of domestic violent extremism, according to [recent assessments by the U.S. intelligence community](#).

The DHS analysts cited social media posts promoting violence online against demonstrators protesting outside justices' homes. According to the bulletin, one post noted that "dead activists in front of a [Supreme Court] justice house WILL kick off the boog." The shorthand refers to "Boogaloo," a common term among extremists motivated by white supremacist conspiracy theories.

Intelligence officials also assessed that certain anti-abortion narratives have been linked to known conspiracy theories such as "save white children" and "fight white genocide."

The department also warned of copycat attacks threatening abortion-related violence in its memo, citing a social media administrator on a racially/ethnically motivated extremist channel that encouraged users to engage in "unrelenting violence" as an alternative to "counter protesting," by referencing prior anti-abortion violent actors.

According to the bulletin, the user wrote, "If you're pro-life but aren't prepared to follow in their footsteps you're wasting your time."

The bulletin outlined signs and indicators of abortion-related violence, intended to help local law enforcement thwart future attacks. Examples include "levying violent threats, encouraging others to commit violence, or doxing individuals to incite or enable violence against others for abortion-related motivations" as well as "pre-operational surveillance, unusual or suspicious interest in a facility, or attempts to gain unauthorized entry to government facilities, reproductive healthcare facilities, or personal residences of Supreme Court Justices."

The nationwide dispatch comes several weeks after state and local law enforcement agencies released intelligence and situational awareness reports warning of a "[highly sensitive and politically charged](#)" threat environment in the wake of the Supreme Court draft opinion leak.

Fusion Centers across the country convened a call – along with FBI and DHS – to warn of the current threat environment.

"A lot of what we have been seeing has been implied threats without specific locations," Mike Sena, president of the National Fusion Center Association, told CBS News.

	<p>"That makes it difficult when you're trying to figure out what crosses that line in online groups," Sena said. "And people can have extreme ideologies, there's nothing wrong with that. But it's the discussion of violence, death and destruction that we're concerned about."</p> <p>In a statement to CBS News, a DHS spokesperson said the department is "committed to protecting Americans' freedom of speech and other civil liberties, including the right to peacefully protest." The department also pledged to share intelligence with other law enforcement agencies and "the private sector."</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 DHS warns on domestic violent extremism
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/domestic-violent-extremists-infiltrating-abortion-debate-dhs-official/story?id=84785471
GIST	<p>Officials from the Department of Homeland Security warned that domestic violent extremists have been infiltrating the national abortion debate "to incite violence amongst their supporters," a senior DHS official told state and local partners on a phone call Monday afternoon, according to a source familiar with the matter.</p> <p>The DHS official did not specify which side, if any, the extremists were taking.</p> <p>Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told reporters in January that domestic violent extremism remains one of "the greatest terrorism related threats" the U.S. faces.</p> <p>"Over the past year, we in the Department of Homeland Security have improved and strengthened our approach to combating this dynamic, evolving threat," Mayorkas said.</p> <p>That official who spoke on the call with local partners warned that as summer approaches -- and with the midterm elections in the fall -- DHS will continue to be in a "heightened security environment."</p> <p>"The leaked Supreme Court opinion on abortion has already triggered an intense political and cultural debate on this topic, and it is very likely it will be an key driver that motivates domestic extremists on different ends of the ideological spectrum to engage in acts of political violence against targets whom they perceive as legitimate," Javed Ali, a former senior director for counterterrorism on the National Security Council told ABC News.</p> <p>In addition to the warning from a senior DHS official on a call with state and local partners, the agency also sent out a bulletin, obtained by ABC News, that warns threats against Supreme Court Justices and members of Congress are likely to increase in the wake of the leaked draft opinion.</p> <p>"The volume of violent threats targeting Supreme Court Justices, members of Congress, other public officials, clergy, healthcare officials and providers, and others associated with the abortion debate are likely to persist and may increase leading up to and following the issuing of the Court's official ruling," the bulletin, dated May 13, said.</p> <p>Additionally, according to the bulletin, the leak of the draft Supreme Court decision "prompted a significant increase in violent threats—many made online via social media and some of which are under investigation—directed toward some US Supreme Court Justices and the Supreme Court building."</p> <p>The National Capital Threat Intelligence Consortium identified at least 25 violent threats on social media that were referred to partner agencies for further investigation, the bulletin says.</p> <p>"Some of these threats discussed burning down or storming the US Supreme Court and murdering Justices and their clerks, members of Congress, and lawful demonstrators."</p>

	<p>The bulletin says individuals across a "individuals across a broad range of various DVE ideologies are attempting to justify and inspire attacks against abortion-related targets and ideological opponents at lawful protests."</p> <p>Another top DHS official warned on a phone call Sunday that not only will domestic violent extremists attempt to use the abortion debate to incite violence, they will also try to take advantage of the ongoing immigration debate, expected to heat up due to the scheduled lifting on May 23 of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention public health order under Title 42 and the potential for the influx of migrants along the southern border.</p> <p>"We do believe that a range of individuals motivated by different ideological grievances will essentially drive an increase in the threat," one DHS official said, according to a source familiar with the call.</p> <p>John Cohen, who recently departed as the former acting undersecretary for intelligence and analysis at DHS, told ABC News that domestic violent extremists try to exploit political divisions.</p> <p>"Domestic violent extremists develop messaging that they promote online, messaging that's intended to exacerbate the fractures in our society," Cohen now an ABC News contributor said. "So, they'll pick issues like abortion, immigration and government COVID activities and elections."</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	05/18 Climate change spark next pandemic?
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20220518-climate-change-could-spark-the-next-pandemic
GIST	<p>As the Earth's climate continues to warm, researchers predict wild animals will be forced to relocate their habitats — likely to regions with large human populations — dramatically increasing the risk of a viral jump to humans that could lead to the next pandemic.</p> <p>This link between climate change and viral transmission is described by an international research team led by scientists at Georgetown University and is published in Nature ("Climate Change Increases Cross-species Viral Transmission Risk," doi:10.1038/s41586-022-04788-w).</p> <p>In their study, the scientists conducted the first comprehensive assessment of how climate change will restructure the global mammalian virome. The work focuses on geographic range shifts — the journeys that species will undertake as they follow their habitats into new areas. As they encounter other mammals for the first time, the study projects they will share thousands of viruses.</p> <p>The scientists say these shifts bring greater opportunities for viruses like Ebola or coronaviruses to emerge in new areas, making them harder to track, and into new types of animals, making it easier for viruses to jump across a "stepping stone" species into humans.</p> <p>"The closest analogy is actually the risks we see in the wildlife trade," says the study's lead author Colin Carlson, PhD, an assistant research professor at the Center for Global Health Science and Security at Georgetown University Medical Center. "We worry about markets because bringing unhealthy animals together in unnatural combinations creates opportunities for this stepwise process of emergence — like how SARS jumped from bats to civets, then civets to people. But markets aren't special anymore; in a changing climate, that kind of process will be the reality in nature just about everywhere."</p> <p>Of concern is that animal habitats will move disproportionately in the same places as human settlements, creating new hotspots of spillover risk. Much of this process may already be underway in today's 1.2 degrees warmer world, and efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions may not stop these events from unfolding.</p>

An additional important finding is the impact rising temperatures will have on bats, which account for the majority of novel viral-sharing. Their ability to fly will allow them to travel long distances and share the most viruses. Because of their central role in viral emergence, the greatest impacts are projected in southeast Asia, a global hotspot of bat diversity.

“At every step,” said Carlson, “our simulations have taken us by surprise. We’ve spent years double-checking those results, with different data and different assumptions, but the models always lead us to these conclusions. It’s a really stunning example of just how well we can, actually, predict the future if we try.”

As viruses start to jump between host species at unprecedented rates, the authors say that the impacts on conservation and human health could be stunning.

“This mechanism adds yet another layer to how climate change will threaten human and animal health,” says the study’s co-lead author, Gregory Albery, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Biology in the Georgetown College.

“It’s unclear exactly how these new viruses might affect the species involved, but it’s likely that many of them will translate to new conservation risks and fuel the emergence of novel outbreaks in humans.”

Altogether, the study suggests that climate change will become the biggest upstream risk factor for disease emergence — exceeding higher-profile issues like deforestation, wildlife trade and industrial agriculture. The authors say the solution is to pair wildlife disease surveillance with real-time studies of environmental change.

“When a Brazilian free-tailed bat makes it all the way to Appalachia, we should be invested in knowing what viruses are tagging along,” says Carlson. “Trying to spot these host jumps in real-time is the only way we’ll be able to prevent this process from leading to more spillovers and more pandemics.”

“We’re closer to predicting and preventing the next pandemic than ever,” says Carlson. “This is a big step towards prediction — now we have to start working on the harder half of the problem.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic, and the previous spread of SARS, Ebola, and Zika, show how a virus jumping from animals to humans can have massive effects. To predict their jump to humans, we need to know about their spread among other animals,” said Sam Scheiner, a program director with the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF), which funded the research. “This research shows how animal movements and interactions due to a warming climate might increase the number of viruses jumping between species.”

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HEADLINE	05/17 Study: air quality impacts of PNW wildfires
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/environment/2022/05/air-quality-impacts-pnw-wildfires-reach-far-new-york
GIST	<p>Forget apples, hipsters and microbrews — the Pacific Northwest may soon be known for supplying something else to the rest of the country: smoke from wildfires.</p> <p>A new study by the National Center for Atmospheric Research concluded that the air quality of the Pacific Northwest — specifically, the levels of carbon monoxide — has been significantly altered by the region’s increasing wildfires.</p> <p>And the trail of pollutants doesn’t end at the Cascades. Wildfires in the Northwest are changing the atmosphere as far east as New York, said Rebecca Buchholz, lead author of the study, published in April.</p> <p>“It’s really adding to current research that’s showing that Pacific Northwest fires are becoming more important for air quality in North America,” Buchholz said.</p>

Buchholz and her team used satellite imagery to track carbon monoxide, a common compound released during wildfires. Using those readings alongside other pollution measures, the researchers determined that pollutants from wildfires were originating in the Northwest and traveling all across North America.

These new readings show a never-before-seen peak in pollution in August, which Buchholz says may point to a reversal of recent gains in air quality.

Humans have been reducing carbon monoxide emitted from other sources, like the tailpipes of cars, Buchholz said. On a global scale, the yearly trend of emissions is on the decline.

“Everywhere else in the world in August, [carbon monoxide] is generally going down,” Buchholz said. “But the Pacific Northwest’s trend is increasing.”

Before 2012, research showed the region’s atmosphere was self-regulating and would show a typical dip in pollutants at the end of the summer. But the new August peak in carbon monoxide reflects the region’s burning season, and the timeframe highlighted by the study — 2012 to 2018 — coincides with when wildfires in the Northwest started becoming more intense.

While Buchholz agreed that more research needs to be done to properly assess the health impacts of a new peak in air pollution, a pilot study by researchers from the same center showed that Colorado may already be among the afflicted.

The study showed Colorado had a significant increase in respiratory death rates in August during the same six-year period, which correlates to increasing forest fires in the Pacific Northwest — and not in Colorado.

For Rachel Baker, the forest program director at the Washington Environmental Council, the study’s new findings aren’t all that surprising.

“Given what we have seen in the news, and the dynamics we’ve seen in the last few wildfire seasons, it didn’t come as a surprise to know that the impacts are this far reaching,” Baker said.

Still, the study’s implications may help the council’s community program manager, Katie Fields, coordinate efforts to inform at-risk communities and secure funding for better forest management.

“Having that concrete information that we can point to really helps to be able to tell a compelling story about why it’s important to have policy actions,” Fields said.

Last April, the Washington State Legislature approved a bipartisan bill that would provide \$500 million over eight years to prevent and fight wildfires. President Joe Biden’s infrastructure bill also approved \$3.3 billion to be used for wildfire management.

Fields said the bill identifies several “firesheds” or at-risk areas in Central Washington, where there’s a greater need for federal funding to mitigate wildfire risk.

“The infusion of money is definitely really beneficial. But it has to be ongoing and sustained,” Fields said.

Baker, a forester by training, stressed the greater responsibility she thinks that Washington has toward the rest of the country as a result of the study.

The Pacific Northwest, Baker said, has the potential to be a part of the climate solution. The forests in the region can store carbon and help mitigate climate change. Conversely, the region has a larger stake in proper forest management to ensure severe wildfires are reduced.

“It’s a lot of responsibility and weight on our shoulders,” Baker said.

The front line

When it comes to wildfires and human health, Baker said, the biggest health risk is borne by those living in wildland-urban Interfaces, or areas where human habitat meets burn-prone green cover — whether those are forests, grasslands or other kinds of vegetation.

Communities living in these areas, typically on the outskirts of urban centers, tend to be inaccessible and difficult to warn against possible fires, Baker said. Not to mention that they live closer to the source of the fires in the first place.

“They’re in areas where wildfires are more likely to occur. That could result in harm to property, to people,” Baker said.

Fields also said that inhabitants of these relatively inaccessible areas tend to be involved in jobs like agriculture that require them to be outside more frequently and more exposed to wildfire smoke.

In July last year, Washington state passed emergency fire and smoke rules to guarantee breaks, cool water and personal protective equipment for workers laboring in temperatures above 100 degrees. It joined Oregon and California as the third state to implement such a rule.

“You see greater exposure to wildfire risk and smoke inhalation risk for people who are working outdoors, whether that’s working in forestry or whether that’s working in farms,” Fields said.

Burning issue

Despite this new research linking wildfire to air quality, experts like Fields and Baker still advocate fighting fire with fire.

Intentional fires, a common strategy for improving forest health, can be a “challenging sell” to communities that live close to forested areas, Baker said. These prescribed fires involve intentionally burning areas of forest to reduce the fuel for more catastrophic fires down the line.

“In some places, there’s not a lot of public acceptance of prescribed fire or maybe less understanding of the fact that it’s important,” Baker said.

According to Baker, wildfires aren’t always a problem. They can often play an important role in regulating a forest’s ecosystems. Catastrophic and uncontrolled fires, however, have grown in frequency in recent years.

Baker maintained that prescribed fires are necessary in order to cultivate forests that are less susceptible to more dangerous wildfires.

“Wildfire is, in fact, a natural part of our ecosystems,” Baker said. “We just need to restore that balance.”

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HEADLINE	05/18 Critical climate indicators broke records
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/may/18/critical-climate-indicators-broke-records-in-2021-says-un
GIST	<p>Critical global indicators of the climate crisis broke records in 2021, according to a UN report, from rising oceans to the levels of heat-trapping emissions in the atmosphere.</p> <p>The UN World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said these were clear signs of humanity’s impact on the planet, which was bringing long-lasting effects. Extreme weather, which the WMO called the day-to-day face of the climate emergency, wreaked a heavy toll on human lives and led to hundreds of billions of dollars in damages, the agency said.</p> <p>Droughts and floods triggered food price rises that have been exacerbated in 2022. The WMO’s State of the Global Climate in 2021 report also found the past seven years have been the hottest recorded.</p>

“Today’s State of the Climate report is a dismal litany of humanity’s failure to tackle climate disruption. Fossil fuels are a dead end – environmentally and economically,” said António Guterres, the secretary general of the UN.

“The only sustainable future is a renewable one. The good news is that the lifeline is right in front of us. Wind and solar are readily available and, in most cases, cheaper than coal and other fossil fuels. If we act together, the renewable energy transformation can be the peace project of the 21st century.”

Prof Petteri Taalas, the WMO secretary general, said: “Our climate is changing before our eyes. Human-induced greenhouse gases will warm the planet for many generations to come. Some glaciers have reached the point of no return and this will have long-term repercussions in a world in which more than 2 billion people already experience water stress.

“Extreme weather has the most immediate impact on our daily lives,” he said. “We are seeing a drought emergency unfolding in the Horn of Africa, recent deadly flooding in South Africa and the extreme heat in India and Pakistan. Early warning systems are critically required [to save lives] yet these are only available in less than half of WMO’s 187 member nations.”

The world’s oceans absorb more than 90% of the heat trapped by greenhouse gases and 2021 set a record. The increasing warmth in the ocean, which is irreversible over timescales of centuries to millennia, has been especially strong in the last 20 years. Much of the ocean experienced at least one strong marine heatwave in 2021, the WMO said.

The global sea level also reached a new record high in 2021. It has increased by 10cm since 1993 and the rise is accelerating, driven by the melting of ice sheets and glaciers and the thermal expansion of the ocean. The rise imperils hundreds of millions of coastal dwellers, the WMO said, and increases the damage caused by hurricanes and cyclones.

Almost a quarter of CO2 emissions are absorbed by the oceans, but this causes them to become more acidic. This threatens shell-forming wildlife and corals and therefore food security, tourism and coastal protection, the WMO said. The oceans are now more acidic than for at least 26,000 years.

CO2 and methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, are at record levels, with CO2 concentration 50% higher than before the Industrial Revolution sparked the mass burning of fossil fuels. The global temperature in 2021 was 1.1C above the pre-industrial average, moving closer towards the 1.5C limit agreed by the world’s nations to avoid the worst climate impacts.

The WMO noted exceptional heatwaves in 2021 in western North America and the Mediterranean, deadly flooding in Henan, China, and western Europe, and rain being recorded for the first time on the summit of Greenland’s ice sheet. The agency warned eastern Africa is facing a high risk of rains failing for a fourth consecutive season, meaning the worst drought in 40 years.

Prof James Hansen, who warned the world about the climate crisis in testimony to the US Senate in 1988, said this week there was “a spectacular, continuing failure of governments to adopt effective long-term energy and climate policies.

“We must all be aware that demands for effective policies will yield only superficial change as long as the role of special interests in government remains unaddressed.”

Last week, the Guardian revealed that 195 oil and gas “carbon bombs” were planned by the industry, ie projects each producing at least a billion tonnes of CO2. These carbon bombs alone would drive global heating beyond the 1.5C limit, but the dozen biggest oil companies are on track to spend \$103m a day to 2030 on climate-busting schemes.

HEADLINE	05/17 Puget Sound 'incident' of UFO
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/puget-sound-holds-ufo-secrets-as-congress-opens-hearings
GIST	<p>DES MOINES, Wash. - On Tuesday, Congress opened hearings into Unidentified Aerial Phenomena, looking into what some call UFOs, for the first time in half a century.</p> <p>The Pentagon showcased declassified photos and video of UFOs to Congress – including a flying object without a "specific" explanation" – as lawmakers pressed military officials on the mysterious sightings.</p> <p>Alien lore also has a special home in Des Moines, where a mural depicts a story that's out-of-this-world.</p> <p>The art shows multiple flying saucers, a mysterious man-in-black and the supposed witness, a man piloting this boat back on Puget Sound in the 1940s. It is called the Maury Island Incident, and someone has already made a movie about it.</p> <p>The Maury Island Incident film follows the story of Harold Dahl, who believes he saw a UFO spilling fiery objects out of the vessel, down onto his boat back in June 1947. The 2014 movie depicts his apparent meeting with so-called men-in-black intent on suppressing his fantastical story.</p> <p>"It is now time for the government to start sharing what it knows about this phenomenon," said Peter Davenport, who runs the National UFO Reporting Center website.</p> <p>The page is an open door where anyone can drop in to share their experience, or images of what they saw.</p> <p>"In a few months it will have been 75 years since the crash of Roswell," he said. "They have been shielding the American people from this information for three-quarters of a century."</p> <p>The National UFO Reporting Center is based in Washington state.</p> <p>"The disconnect is so large between the reality behind the scenes versus 80-some years of lying since WWII," said Linda Moulton Howe, an investigative journalist studying all things UFO, alien and related.</p> <p>She said today's hearing felt forced, believing Congress held them for show. Howe says the real evidence for UFOs have been obvious for years.</p> <p>"He said they were like flying saucers, and that is when that phrase stuck in 1947," she continued.</p> <p>Back near Des Moines, Dahl would later recant his story, saying he would rather be known as a liar than suffer continued ridicule.</p> <p>Howe believes fewer people are finding tales and stories about UFO sightings as mere make-believe.</p> <p>"I think that percent becomes smaller and smaller every year," she said.</p> <p>The deputy director of Naval Intelligence told Congress there is no evidence from wreckage that the objects are extraterrestrial. Military pilots have spotted multiple objects, and so far, there have been nearly a dozen reported near misses for collisions with U.S. aircraft.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Hunt: culprit in mysterious hepatitis cases
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/05/17/hepatitis-children-investigation-cause/
GIST	<p>The young child had been vomiting for days and was now at a Birmingham, Ala., hospital with yellowing eyes and a severely inflamed liver. Elizabeth Gutierrez, a pediatric gastroenterologist, ran blood tests that immediately ruled out all the common causes of viral hepatitis. She remembered thinking how rare it was to see acute hepatitis with an unknown cause in an otherwise healthy child.</p>

Within a week, a second child with the same symptoms showed up at Children's of Alabama. And then a third. "Sometimes in medicine, cases come in threes, so we started to think, 'Maybe three cases and we'll be done,' " Gutierrez said.

But the cases kept coming. Over the next four months, doctors would care for nine children, all younger than 6, with severe liver inflammation of unknown origin. Two children were transported to an out-of-state hospital for liver transplants.

What Alabama doctors believed was a local outbreak last October has since burgeoned into a mysterious global eruption involving at least 450 children across 20 countries, including 109 in the United States. Eleven children have died, including five in the United States. More than two dozen have needed liver transplants — 15 in this country.

"It's extremely unusual because these are healthy children," most of them younger than 5, said Elizabeth Whittaker, a pediatric infectious diseases specialist at Imperial College in London, who is assisting the investigation in the United Kingdom, which has reported 176 cases, the largest number of any country. Mild hepatitis is fairly common in children, she said, but doctors are seeing something quite different and alarming: children with liver injury severe enough to require transplants. Typically, the U.K. might have eight to 10 such transplants in a year, she said. This year, it has had 11 in three months.

The growing constellation of cases has spurred an international hunt to identify the culprit, with disease detectives and researchers from global health agencies, the United States, the U.K., Israel, Italy and Japan weighing in to share data and hypotheses. Hepatitis, which is an inflammation of the liver, is typically caused by one of several known viruses — hepatitis A, B, C, D or E. But those have all been ruled out in these cases, which are also unusually severe.

After seven months, "we have not had any 'aha' moments," Whittaker acknowledged. But the accumulating evidence points to two leading suspects — a pair of viruses, working singly or perhaps in tandem. One is adenovirus — a common family of viruses that cause symptoms ranging from the common cold to pinkeye. The second is the coronavirus responsible for the pandemic, which some doctors theorize may have contributed to liver inflammation through an old infection or a co-infection that has triggered the immune system to overreact.

Alongside the doctors working frantically to solve the mystery are scores of families who watched as their children went from what seemed like everyday bouts of stomach upset, diarrhea and vomiting to severe liver inflammation to liver failure — and, in a handful of cases, were told their children needed transplants. Some are now sharing the details of their experiences to help solve the mystery.

Is it linked to COVID? adenovirus?

The search has been challenging, full of tantalizing but inconclusive leads, in part because doctors in different countries have tested for different things and there are not yet standardized protocols. The strongest evidence tying the hepatitis cases to adenovirus are test results that showed it in the blood of more than half the children in the United States and nearly three-fourths of those in the U.K. Some of the children also tested positive for the same adenovirus 41 strain associated with severe stomach illness.

But doctors are baffled that they have yet to find adenovirus in the liver tissue, which they would expect to find there if it was causing the injury.

"Not finding it in the liver, to date, is something that obviously is a bit perplexing," said Umesh Parashar, chief of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's viral gastroenteritis branch, who leads a team of 35 to 40 officials investigating the cases in the United States.

"We are stumped," said Markus Buchfellner, a pediatric infectious diseases physician at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, who has been part of the team probing the Alabama cases since October.

Last week, the CDC sent an updated advisory to clinicians with more-specific recommendations on adenovirus testing.

Doctors in Israel have theorized that the hepatitis is linked to the pandemic because most of their several dozen sick children showed evidence of past coronavirus infections. Israel has seen more than 40 cases of the severe hepatitis in children, including two infants who received transplants.

“Some of us think that the only thing that changed in the last year is COVID-19,” Eyal Shteyer, who heads the pediatric liver unit at Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem, where seven children were treated, wrote in an email. “I think that covid caused some immune dysregulation that led to the hepatitis.”

U.S. and U.K. doctors have noted that few of the children they treated for hepatitis had documented coronavirus infections. Studies, however, have shown that three-quarters of children in this country and more than 95 percent of those in the U.K. have COVID-19 antibodies indicating past infections.

Investigators are exploring other theories as well, including whether young children who had fewer social interactions during the pandemic may have been more susceptible to adenovirus. They’re also looking at whether a more lethal adenovirus might have emerged, and whether a co-infection with the coronavirus could make adenovirus “manifest in a way that has not been commonly seen before,” said Jay Butler, the CDC’s deputy director of infectious disease.

A letter published Friday in the Lancet suggests that part of the coronavirus’ spike protein resembles a bacterial toxin and may be causing the immune system to go haywire when there is a co-infection with adenovirus 41.

Other possibilities under exploration include a potential link to dogs after U.K. investigators also noticed that 70 percent of their children came from dog-owning families, or had other dog exposures. The significance of that finding “is being explored,” investigators said.

The Widders family’s story

In a Cincinnati suburb, Elizabeth Widders wasn’t too worried when her 4-year-old daughter, Liviah, started throwing up a few weeks before Christmas. Elizabeth figured the little girl had eaten too much candy at a sleepover at her grandmother’s house the night before. Liviah was her usual cheerful self, with no fever or other sign of illness. When her older brother started vomiting and spiked a fever, the Widderses assumed both kids had a stomach bug.

But a few days before Christmas, Elizabeth was struck as she did her daughter’s hair that the whites of the girl’s eyes had turned yellow. Liviah also confided that “her pee was orange.” The mother of three guessed right away that it was jaundice.

Jack Widders couldn’t see the yellowing until they moved from the kitchen into the foyer, with more natural light. It was obvious to him then, too. “One thing we’ve been telling parents ... get your kids in natural light, check out their eyes,” Elizabeth has since counseled others.

After they rushed Liviah to a hospital emergency room, Elizabeth also noticed that part of the child’s stool was light-colored, another telltale sign of liver problems.

Within hours, Liviah was transferred to Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center. Tests there showed that she had an enlarged liver and extraordinarily high liver enzymes, signs of inflammation. “That, for us, was like the first punch in the gut,” Elizabeth said.

Over the next week and a half, the Widderses rode an emotional roller coaster, elated by seeming improvements, only to despair over indicators of the severe damage to their daughter’s liver. “Her skin was essentially yellow,” Jack recalled.

Still, the couple were stunned when doctors told them only a few days later that their little girl needed a liver transplant. While she waited for a donor, she received special therapy to wash her blood of toxins, a function normally performed by her liver.

The next few days unfolded in a blur of anxiety. On New Year's Day, Liviah received an organ from a deceased child donor. "In 11 days, she went from a perfectly healthy girl to a transplant recipient," Jack said.

The Widderses said doctors had no idea what was making Liviah sick. Adenovirus was found in her blood but not in her diseased liver, which doctors would have expected if the virus had caused direct injury, said Jorge Bezerra, director of the hospital's Pediatric Liver Care Center. He noted that it is possible the immune system had cleared the virus from the organ, making it difficult to find.

She also had no sign of coronavirus antibodies before the operation, but tested positive afterward, which doctors attributed to blood transfusions.

"It is a mystery," Bezerra said.

Liviah's case is among six under investigation at the Cincinnati hospital since the CDC issued a national alert April 21 warning doctors to watch for cases of unexplained severe hepatitis in children, Bezerra said.

Only two of those children — Liviah and one other — tested positive for adenovirus. Some adenovirus strains are spread through close contact, but there was no history of that between the two cases, he said.

Looking for connections among sick people

When outbreaks occur, disease detectives are trained to seek the cause by looking for connections among the people who get sick, the places they fall ill or have recently traveled to, and the timing of those illnesses.

In Alabama, Gutierrez, Buchfellner and Henry Shiau, another pediatric gastroenterologist at the children's hospital, began searching for a pattern among their cases in late October, pinning markers on a map representing the children's ZIP codes. But the patients came from all over Alabama, three to four hours' drive from one another, making it unlikely the families could have met or communicated, Buchfellner said. That ruled out a transmission pathway, because adenovirus 41, which was found in the first five children, is spread through close contact.

If geography played no role, the doctors wondered why they hadn't heard of other reports. They checked with pediatric colleagues elsewhere, but no one had similar cases.

"There was always that thought in the back of my head: 'Why aren't we seeing these cases anywhere else in the country?'" Buchfellner recalled.

In November, after their fourth case, doctors sought help from the CDC. They wanted to know if it was unusual to have so many cases of acute hepatitis and noted that "all had tested positive for adenovirus," said Jackie Tate, an epidemiologist with the CDC's viral gastroenteritis office.

Federal health officials confirmed that it was definitely unusual. Adenovirus had previously been associated with severe liver disease only in immunocompromised children. But they had no idea if the Alabama cluster might be part of something bigger.

In February, the Alabama Health Department alerted clinicians throughout the state to be on the lookout for additional cases. None were reported.

Everything would change in late March, when doctors thousands of miles away in Scotland reported a group of 14 children with unusual and severe hepatitis, also of unknown cause. That prompted the U.K. Health Security Agency to send out an alert in early April. Two weeks later, the CDC followed with its

own nationwide alert about the Alabama children. It asked clinicians to test unexplained hepatitis cases for adenovirus and to report them to state and federal health officials.

Almost immediately, reports began trickling in. North Carolina reported two cases; Illinois, three. Wisconsin was investigating four cases, including a child who needed a transplant, and the first U.S. death. The 109 cases currently being investigated by the CDC come from 25 states and Puerto Rico.

Asked why the CDC didn't alert doctors sooner, Parashar said the agency was aware only of the Alabama cases "and so we were a bit perplexed — is this bigger or not?" But after the illness started popping up in other countries, "that raised the vigilance for all of us," he said.

And as cases continued climbing in the past month, investigators mobilized an elite cadre of experts. Besides the pediatricians and liver disease specialists already involved, they brought in immunologists to see whether the children's immune systems might be misfiring, toxicologists to analyze urine and blood specimens for toxins, and pathologists to look for clues in liver biopsies, among others.

Some of the biggest contributions to the investigation have come from the U.K. because hospitals in England regularly test for adenovirus. It also randomly samples the population to see what viruses are circulating.

That surveillance turned up a surprising finding: "There was a massive peak of adenovirus this winter in the under-5 age group that has not been seen in any of the last five years," said Whittaker, of Imperial College, noting that young children often have different responses to new viruses than older children or adults do. "We have to assume that one way or the other, it may be playing a role, whether in combination with covid or independent of covid."

But establishing proof of those links may be difficult because many of the hepatitis cases occurred months ago, when few clinicians collected the kind of tissue specimens investigators say they need to solve the mystery.

The CDC reaches out for help

In November, the CDC reached out to New York state's Wadsworth Center, one of the nation's premier public health labs for genetic sequencing and one of the few that can test for adenovirus. They sought to learn if an unusual combination of genes or mutations in the adenovirus strains found in the blood of the sick children might explain "why it is suddenly causing a disease phenomenon," said Kirsten St. George, Wadsworth's chief of viral diseases.

Wadsworth identified adenovirus 41 in five of the nine Alabama children, the same strain found in 18 out of 18 U.K. children who had sufficient viral loads in their specimens to allow for the testing. The problem is that most of the children did not have enough concentration of the virus to enable more-sophisticated testing for a specific strain or to find out whether that strain might be novel.

"You can sequence parts of the virus," said the CDC's Parashar. "But it's like the elephant story. If you catch the ear, you call it a different animal than if you catch the tail. You need to look at the full sequence to really be able to see if it's something unusual ... compared with the typical adenovirus strain."

The possible role of the coronavirus in the outbreaks is even more confounding because of the difficulty of establishing whether the children may have had undiagnosed earlier infections that affected their immune systems.

None of the nine Alabama children had received a coronavirus vaccine before their hospitalizations because they were too young to be eligible. And none had a documented COVID-19 illness during their hospitalizations or before. But the children were not tested for coronavirus antibodies to look for evidence of prior infections.

U.K. investigators detected the coronavirus in 24 of 132 cases, and investigators found some instances of adenovirus and coronavirus co-infection. They are “rigorously testing” the association with adenovirus, as well as “the role of other contributors, including prior SARS-CoV-2 and other infections,” Meera Chand, a top U.K. health official, said in a May 12 statement. (SARS-CoV-2 is the formal name for the coronavirus.)

U.K. and U.S. investigators said the widespread prevalence of coronavirus infection in children makes it hard to assess its role. It’s possible that a previous coronavirus infection could be “modifying what adenovirus does in the children,” the CDC’s Parashar said.

Doctors in Israel are big exponents of the idea that the hepatitis cases are related to previous coronavirus infections.

Shteyer, the Jerusalem specialist, acknowledged that the different perspectives may reflect different testing approaches among countries — and perhaps even different diseases. Israeli doctors have not done extensive testing for adenovirus, he said, but plan to do so now.

He urged the adoption of common testing protocols worldwide to investigate the cases.

Liviah Widders was lucky to have been diagnosed quickly, and even luckier to get a new liver in four days.

But she’s also had big adjustments. Because of her weakened immune system — she received high doses of steroids to prevent her body from rejecting the donor liver — her preschool teacher taught her remotely until just recently, when she recovered enough to go back to school, resume dance classes and play in her first soccer game.

Her parents have explained to her that someone gave her a new liver, but that’s been hard for the youngster to comprehend fully. But Liviah, who loves dressing up as a princess, is proud of the backward-L-shaped incision on her right side, just above her belly button.

“We call it her princess mark, and she is happy to share it and show it to anyone,” Jack Widders said.

The anti-rejection medication is hard on Liviah’s kidneys, and her parents want her to drink 56 ounces of liquids daily. A water bottle chart on the kitchen refrigerator is a reminder.

“We’re instilling these things to take care of herself, because this is going to be a forever thing for her,” Elizabeth Widders said.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Pentagon: 400 reports of UFO encounters
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/pentagon-reports-400-ufo-encounters-tells-congress-theyre-investigating-video/story?id=84753756
GIST	<p>Top Pentagon officials told a House panel on Tuesday that there are now close to 400 reports from military personnel of possible encounters with UFOs -- a significant increase from the 144 tracked in a major report released last year by the U.S. intelligence community.</p> <p>A Navy official also said at Tuesday's hearing that investigators are "reasonably confident" the floating pyramid-shaped objects captured on one leaked, widely seen military video were likely drones.</p> <p>That footage, which the military confirmed last year was authentic, had helped spur interest in purported UFOs, also referred to as "unidentified aerial phenomena" or UAPs.</p>

Indiana Rep. André Carson, the Democratic chairman of the House Intelligence Counterterrorism, Counterintelligence, and Counterproliferation Subcommittee, called Tuesday's hearing, the first in more than 50 years focused on the aerial incidents.

UAPs, Carson said, "are a potential national security threat and they need to be treated that way."

"For too long the stigma associated with UAPs has gotten in the way of good intelligence analysis," he added. "Pilots avoided reporting or were laughed at when they did."

The number of UAP reports has risen to "approximately 400," a significant increase from the 144 between 2004 and 2021 that were tracked in last year's report, according to Scott Bray, the deputy director of Naval Intelligence. Bray told the House panel that the spike was due to a reduction in the stigma associated with stepping forward to report such incidents in the wake of the 2021 report.

"We've seen an increasing number of unauthorized and or unidentified aircraft or objects and military control training areas and training ranges and other designated airspace," Bray said. "Reports of sightings are frequent and continuous."

But Bray believes many of the newly disclosed accounts are actually "historic reports that are narrative-based" from prior incidents that people are only now coming forward with, which leads him to believe there will be fewer new accounts in the future.

Last year's intelligence report could only explain one of the documented 144 encounters and did not contain the words "alien" or "extraterrestrial." The report stated then that the UAP incidents would require further study.

At Tuesday's hearing, Bray echoed last year's conclusion that most of the phenomena were likely physical objects and noted that "the UAP task force doesn't have any wreckage that ... isn't consistent with being a terrestrial origin."

Even so, Bray said, questions remain.

"I can't point to something that definitively was not man-made, but I can point to a number of examples which remain unresolved," Bray said, citing video of a 2004 incident in which a Navy pilot [recorded an unusual, Tic Tac-like object](#) over the water.

"We want to know what's out there as much as you want to know what's out there," said Ronald Moultrie, the Pentagon's top intelligence official, who also testified at the hearing.

Moultrie said the Pentagon is establishing an office to speed up "the identification of previously unknown or unidentified airborne objects in a methodical, logical and standardized manner."

"We also understand that there has been a cultural stigma surrounding UAP," Moultrie said. "Our goal is to eliminate the stigma by fully incorporating our operators and mission personnel into a standardized data gathering process."

"Our goal is to strike that delicate balance: one that enables us to maintain the public's trust while preserving those capabilities that are vital to the support of our service personnel," he said.

Bray said "Navy and Air Force crews now have step-by-step procedures for reporting on a UAP on their kneeboard in the cockpit" and that these efforts have led to more reporting.

The [increasingly mainstream interest in UFOs and UAPs](#) has been sparked in recent years by leaks of once-classified videos and the Navy's release of footage from their pilots' own encounters.

At Tuesday's hearing, the defense officials played three clips to help explain how brief the aerial incidents could be, making it very difficult to determine what was seen in the videos.

In one of the more notable cases, the officials detailed how "considerable effort" went into determining a theory for what was observed.

Bray played footage taken in July 2019 off the California coast from the deck of the destroyer USS Russell that seemed to show several pyramid-shaped objects hovering above the ship.

Bray acknowledged that investigators did not initially have an explanation for what was seen in the green night scope video -- until they were able to contrast it with a more recent video of an incident that occurred off the coast of the Atlantic Ocean.

Officials who looked at that video found a similar pyramid shape. They concluded the phenomena were likely from drones that had been seen on sensors from another Navy asset.

"We're now reasonably confident that these triangles correlate to unmanned aerial systems in the area," Bray explained. "The triangular appearance is a result of light passing through the night vision goggles and then being recorded by an SLR camera."

"This is a great example of how it takes considerable effort to understand what we're seeing in the examples that we are able to collect," he added.

Ahead of the hearing, Jeremy Corbell, a documentary filmmaker and UFO enthusiast who made public that "pyramid" video last year, said he was happy to see increasing awareness and government action.

"What is so great is that this is a direct response to public will," Corbell told ABC News. "It is direct response to public pressure. It is representative government representing the citizens and their interest."

"I am encouraged by the public desire to know and find out the truth of what UFOs represent to humankind," Corbell said then. "It's the biggest story of our time. And finally we're beginning to have the conversation without ridicule and stigma that has so injured the search for scientific truth on this topic."

Moultrie, the Pentagon official, said at Tuesday's hearing that he wasn't immune to a bit of the zeal himself as a science fiction fan.

"I have gone to conventions -- I'll say it on the record. Got to break the ice somehow," he told the panel in one lighthearted line of questioning, adding, "We have our we have our inquisitiveness. We have our questions."

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HEADLINE	05/17 Study: global pollution kills 9M a year
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/global-pollution-kills-9-million-people-a-year-study-finds/
GIST	<p>A new study blames pollution of all types for 9 million deaths a year globally, with the death toll attributed to dirty air from cars, trucks and industry rising 55% since 2000.</p> <p>That increase is offset by fewer pollution deaths from primitive indoor stoves and water contaminated with human and animal waste, so overall pollution deaths in 2019 are about the same as 2015.</p> <p>The United States is the only fully industrialized country in the top 10 nations for total pollution deaths, ranking 7th with 142,883 deaths blamed on pollution in 2019, sandwiched between Bangladesh and Ethiopia, according to a new study in the journal The Lancet Planetary Health. Tuesday's pre-pandemic study is based on calculations derived from the Global Burden of Disease database and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation in Seattle. India and China lead the world in pollution deaths with nearly</p>

2.4 million and almost 2.2 million deaths a year, but the two nations also have the world's largest populations.

When deaths are put on a per population rate, the United States ranks 31st from the bottom at 43.6 pollution deaths per 100,000. Chad and the Central African Republic rank the highest with rates about 300 pollution deaths per 100,000, more than half of them due to tainted water, while Brunei, Qatar and Iceland have the lowest pollution death rates ranging from 15 to 23. The global average is 117 pollution deaths per 100,000 people.

Pollution kills about the same number of people a year around the world as cigarette smoking and second-hand smoke combined, the study said.

"9 million deaths is a lot of deaths," said Philip Landrigan, director of the Global Public Health Program and Global Pollution Observatory at Boston College.

"The bad news is that it's not decreasing," Landrigan said. "We're making gains in the easy stuff and we're seeing the more difficult stuff, which is the ambient (outdoor industrial) air pollution and the chemical pollution, still going up."

It doesn't have to be this way, researchers said.

"They are preventable deaths. Each and every one of them is a death that is unnecessary," said Dr. Lynn Goldman, dean of the George Washington University School of Public Health, who wasn't part of the study. She said the calculations made sense and if anything, was so conservative about what it attributed to pollution, that the real death toll is likely higher.

The certificates for these deaths don't say pollution. They list heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, other lung issues and diabetes that are "tightly correlated" with pollution by numerous epidemiological studies, Landrigan said. To then put these together with actual deaths, researchers look at the number of deaths by cause, exposure to pollution weighted for various factors, and then complicated exposure response calculations derived by large epidemiological studies based on thousands of people over decades of study, he said. It's the same way scientists can say cigarettes cause cancer and heart disease deaths.

"That cannon of information constitutes causality," Landrigan said. "That's how we do it."

Five outside experts in public health and air pollution, including Goldman, told The Associated Press the study follows mainstream scientific thought. Dr. Renee Salas, an emergency room doctor and Harvard professor who wasn't part of the study, said "the American Heart Association determined over a decade ago that exposure to (tiny pollution particles) like that generated from the burning of fossil fuels is causal for heart disease and death."

"While people focus on decreasing their blood pressure and cholesterol, few recognize that the removal of air pollution is an important prescription to improve their heart health," Salas said.

Three-quarters of the overall pollution deaths came from air pollution and the overwhelming part of that is "a combination of pollution from stationary sources like coal-fired power plants and steel mills on one hand and mobile sources like cars, trucks and buses. And it's just a big global problem," said Landrigan, a public health physician. "And it's getting worse around the world as countries develop and cities grow."

In New Delhi, India, air pollution peaks in the winter months and last year the city saw just two days when the air wasn't considered polluted. It was the first time in four years that the city experienced a clean air day during the winter months.

That air pollution remains the leading cause of death in South Asia reconfirms what is already known, but the increase in these deaths means that toxic emissions from vehicles and energy generation is increasing,

said Anumita Roychowdhury, a director at the advocacy group Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi.

“This data is a reminder of what is going wrong but also that it is an opportunity to fix it,” Roychowdhury said.

Pollution deaths are soaring in the poorest areas, experts said.

“This problem is worst in areas of the world where population is most dense (e.g. Asia) and where financial and government resources to address the pollution problem are limited and stretched thin to address a host of challenges including health care availability and diet as well as pollution,” said Dan Greenbaum, president of the Health Effects Institute, who wasn’t part of the study.

In 2000, industrial air pollution killed about 2.9 million people a year globally. By 2015 it was up to 4.2 million and in 2019 it was 4.5 million, the study said. Toss in household air pollution, mostly from inefficient primitive stoves, and air pollution killed 6.7 million people in 2019, the study found.

Lead pollution — some from lead additive which has been banned from gasoline in every country in the world and also from old paint, recycling batteries and other manufacturing — kills 900,000 people a year, while water pollution is responsible for 1.4 million deaths a year. Occupational health pollution adds another 870,000 deaths, the study said.

In the United States, about 20,000 people a year die from lead pollution-induced hypertension, heart disease and kidney disease, mostly as occupational hazards, Landrigan said. Lead and asbestos are America’s big chemical occupational hazards, and they kill about 65,000 people a year from pollution, he said. The study said the number of air pollution deaths in the United States in 2019 was 60,229, far more than deaths on American roads, which hit a 16-year peak of nearly 43,000 last year.

Modern types of pollution are rising in most countries, especially developing ones, but fell from 2000 to 2019 in the United States, the European Union and Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s numbers can’t quite be explained and may be a reporting issue, said study co-author Richard Fuller, founder of the Global Alliance on Health and Pollution and president of Pure Earth, a non-profit that works on pollution clean-up programs in about a dozen countries.

The study authors came up with eight recommendations to reduce pollution deaths, highlighting the need for better monitoring, better reporting and stronger government systems regulating industry and cars.

“We absolutely know how to solve each one of those problems,” Fuller said. “What’s missing is political will.”

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	05/17 Mexico: 100,000 officially missing
SOURCE	https://news.yahoo.com/more-100-000-people-officially-193929496.html
GIST	<p>More than 100,000 people are now listed as missing in violence-wracked Mexico, a grim milestone that the United Nations rights chief on Tuesday called "a tragedy of enormous proportions."</p> <p>Rights groups appealed for urgent action to tackle disappearances that have skyrocketed during years of spiraling drug-related violence.</p> <p>The National Registry of Missing Persons, which has been tracking disappearances since 1964, said that as of Monday, the whereabouts of 100,099 people were unknown. About 75 percent are men.</p>

The Movement for Our Disappeared warned that the figure was "certainly well below the number" of actual cases, calling for the government to deal with the crisis "in a comprehensive and immediate manner."

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said the disappearances represented a "human tragedy of enormous proportions."

"No effort should be spared to put an end to these human rights violations and abuses of extraordinary breadth, and to vindicate victims' rights to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition," she added.

Only 35 of the disappearances recorded have led to convictions -- a "staggering rate of impunity" that is "mostly attributable to the lack of effective investigations," Bachelet's office said.

- 'Pattern of impunity' -

The UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances described the situation as "heart-breaking."

Enforced disappearances are a daily occurrence in Mexico, "reflecting a chronic pattern of impunity," they added.

The UN committee, which is made up of independent experts, warned in April that Mexico was facing an "alarming trend of rising enforced disappearances."

Organized crime groups were mainly responsible for these disappearances, "with varying degrees of participation, acquiescence or omission by public servants," it said.

The committee's report was rejected by Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who said his government would not tolerate impunity or corruption.

Frustration at slow progress in official investigations has led families of the disappeared, especially mothers, to form groups that search for clandestine graves using picks and shovels.

The crisis is fueled by the state's apathy, said Cecilia Flores, the leader of one such group in the northwestern state of Sonora who is looking for her sons Alejandro and Marco Antonio.

"If the authorities did their job, not so many would have disappeared," she told AFP.

"For them, a disappeared person is one less criminal and one more statistic," Flores said.

- 'Staggering number' -

Authorities say some 37,000 unidentified bodies are being held in forensic services, though civil organizations warn the number could be much higher.

Authorities are working to consolidate a database of the disappeared with genetic samples, though many corpses have been buried without being identified because morgues are overflowing.

The International Committee of the Red Cross described the 100,000 missing as "a staggering number that underscores the immediate need to strengthen prevention, search, and identification mechanisms for those who are missing and their families."

However, it recognized "important progress" made by Mexico in some areas including identifying the dead and easing the pain of families of the missing.

	<p>"The first few hours are the most important," said Marlene Herbig, head of the ICRC's missing persons program in Mexico.</p> <p>"When someone disappears, their relatives have the right to know what has happened. Knowing the fate of disappeared persons is primarily a humanitarian act."</p> <p>The first reported disappearances in Mexico date back to the authorities' so-called "dirty war" against leftist movements from the 1960s to 1980s.</p> <p>Mexico has also registered over 340,000 deaths -- mostly attributed to organized crime groups -- since 2006, when a major anti-drug military offensive was launched.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/18 Buffalo shooter plan online 30min. prior
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/18/us/buffalo-supermarket-shooting-wednesday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Thirty minutes before an 18-year-old White man allegedly carried out a racist mass shooting Saturday at a supermarket in a mostly Black enclave of Buffalo, New York, he revealed his monthslong plot to some on social media.</p> <p>Payton S. Gendron -- suspected of killing 10 people and wounding three -- had created a private chat room on the communications app Discord and invited people to view his chat logs before his attack at the Tops Friendly Markets store, a Discord spokesperson told CNN.</p> <p>"What we know at this time is that a private, invite-only server was created by the suspect to serve as a personal diary chat log," a spokesperson for Discord said Tuesday in a statement to CNN. "Approximately 30 minutes prior to the attack, however, a small group of people were invited to and joined the server. Before that, our records indicate no other people saw the diary chat log in this private server."</p> <p>In the posts -- which CNN has analyzed and later were posted more widely on the hate-filled 4chan online forum -- the alleged gunman wrote he visited the supermarket three times March 8 to survey its layout. He also wrote he used Google's graph feature for a location's "popular times" to determine the busiest times at the store.</p> <p>Gendron posted he chose the ZIP code in Buffalo because it was the one with the greatest percentage of Black people that's relatively near his home in Conklin, New York. The cities are about 230 miles apart.</p> <p>Discord removed the server and related content "as soon as" it was aware of it following the shooting, the spokesperson said. The company declined to say whether anyone invited to view the logs alerted moderators to the posts.</p> <p>4Chan has not responded to CNN's requests for comment about Gendron's posts being shared on the platform.</p> <p>The shooting targeting the supermarket in the heart of a predominantly Black community is being investigated as a hate crime and an act of racially motivated violent extremism, authorities said, noting 11 of the 13 people shot were Black. Among those killed was a former police officer who tried to stop the shooter, a teacher, a taxi driver and shoppers, all ages 32 to 86.</p> <p>"Our deepest sympathies are with the victims and their families," the Discord spokesperson said. "Hate has no place on Discord and we are committed to combating violence and extremism."</p> <p>Gendron has pleaded not guilty to a charge of first-degree murder, officials said, noting additional charges are forthcoming.</p> <p>Suspect's social media footprint key to probe</p>

Since the shooting, the suspect's online trail has revealed details about his plans for the attack. And officials have followed his digital footprint to piece together his motives.

First, Gendron chose a grocery store as his crime scene over a church or an elementary school because the store would attract many people at its peak times, according to his Discord posts that were published on 4chan.

He then took note of how many Black and White people were there each time he visited on March 8 and drew a map of the store's interior, his posts show. The posts also reveal that the shooter planned his attack for March 15 but delayed it several times.

When he carried out the shooting, he wore a tactical helmet and plated armor and livestreamed his moves, Buffalo Police Commissioner Joseph Gramaglia said.

Officials are also examining a 180-page racist document they say was written by Gendron. In it, the suspect confesses to the attack and described himself as a fascist, a White supremacist and an anti-Semite.

The document says the attacker didn't start seriously planning the attack until January. The author also shares his perspective on the dwindling size of the White population and claims of [ethnic and cultural replacement of Whites](#).

"All the evidence that we ascertain from that manifesto, from wherever that manifesto leads us, other pieces of evidence we already had, we can then use that and develop more charges potentially," Erie County District Attorney John Flynn said.

[Discord, launched in 2015](#), isn't as well-known as big names like Instagram, even as it surged to 150 million monthly active users globally during the pandemic. Reminiscent of anonymous chat rooms, it blends the feel of early AOL chat rooms or work chat app Slack with the chaotic, personalized world of MySpace and is known for its video game communities.

Previous school threat under investigation

Another warning sign may have been a threat he made in June when he was a student at Susquehanna Valley Central High School in Conklin, Gramaglia said.

Gendron made a project on murder-suicides, which prompted police to take him for a mental health evaluation, Gramaglia said. Gendron was released after the evaluation, he said.

The evaluation was not an involuntary commitment, so it would not have prevented the suspected shooter from purchasing or possessing a gun under federal law, New York State police spokesperson Beau Duffy said at the time.

Now, the Broome County district attorney's office is investigating that school threat incident, as well as the suspect's overall behavior, he said.

"We're even going back several years as far as what his behavior was at that point in time, his relationship with his family, his relationship with teachers and students at the school," prosecutor Michael Korchak told CNN.

It's "hard to say" whether more should have been done at the time of the threat was made, he added.

"So there were no direct threats made to any student or teacher," Korchak said. "Individuals that have mental health issues may have it under control for a period of time, and then one day they just snap and things as tragic as this happen."

No red flag order requested

	<p>After the school threat, New York State Police officials did not seek a "red flag" order of protection against Gendron, a state police spokesman told CNN on Tuesday.</p> <p>The Red Flag Law, also known as the extreme risk protection order law, was enacted on August 24, 2019, and is designed to prevent anyone who shows signs of being a threat to themselves or others from purchasing a firearm, according to the state website.</p> <p>State police declined to go into detail about why they did not seek the red flag. "The threat was general in nature and did not target the school or anyone in particular, and did not specifically mention shooting or firearms," a law enforcement official told CNN.</p> <p>Certain clinicians who determine if someone's "likely to engage in conduct that would result in serious harm to self or others" are required to report that to a county health commissioner, who can report that to the state's Division of Criminal Justice Services, which can block people from buying guns and revoke gun permits, a former senior official in the state Office of Mental Health told CNN this week.</p> <p>Federal law prohibits someone involuntarily committed to a mental health institution from buying a gun, the official said. It doesn't cover someone in a mental institution "for observation," the official said.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Buffalo shooter's 673-page diary
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/buffalo-shooting-supermarket-673-page-diary-reveals-suspects-descent-into-racist-extremism-11652814938?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>CONKLIN, N.Y.—Days before carrying out one of the deadliest racially motivated attacks in recent U.S. history, Payton Gendron wrote that he'd finally made up his mind.</p> <p>"I just don't have the time to wait any longer," he posted online. "I was supposed to do this 2 months ago. But now I finally feel actually ready."</p> <p>The entry was from a nearly 700-page online diary that Mr. Gendron, an 18-year-old white man, kept for the past several months. Writing under the online pseudonym "Jimboboiiii," he detailed his preparations for the massacre and his embrace of racist conspiracy theories that he said drove him to kill. A link to the diary was posted on a public web forum shortly before Mr. Gendron opened fire at a supermarket in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Buffalo last Saturday.</p> <p>The attack left 10 people dead and three more wounded. All but two of his 13 victims were Black. They included an 86-year-old grandmother, a retired Buffalo police lieutenant and a church deacon.</p> <p>Mr. Gendron, who is being held without bail after surrendering to police, pleaded not guilty to a single charge of first degree murder. Federal prosecutors said they are contemplating charging him with hate crimes.</p> <p>Mr. Gendron's diary entries, which appear to date from November 2021 to the night before the shooting, along with an accompanying 180-page document, chronicle his descent into a shadowy, isolated world of swirling conspiracies, paranoia and violence.</p> <p>Investigators are working to fill in missing pieces of Mr. Gendron's background. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and police continue to pore over evidence from Conklin to Buffalo.</p> <p>But Mr. Gendron's extensive posts—a dark and paranoid monologue—present a portrait of a mass shooter that has become familiar in recent years: a lone actor, socially isolated and mentally troubled, who finds inspiration to commit mass violence in the recesses of the Internet.</p> <p>Mr. Gendron seemed to live an unremarkable childhood. He played soccer as a youth, was a Boy Scout and made his high school's honor roll. He planned on going to college to become an engineer.</p>

In the months leading up to the massacre, Mr. Gendron spent hours glued to a computer in his family's home in this quiet, predominantly white town in upstate New York. He posted dozens of hateful memes about Black people and Jews, discussed past racially motivated mass shootings and planned his own attack in painstaking detail. In March, he drove hundreds of miles to scout the Buffalo supermarket he later attacked.

He disdained mainstream political parties and the media, writing that he believed they were controlled by Jews. He described himself as a fascist.

Though there were harbingers of trouble—including a 2021 incident in which he was [hospitalized after threatening violence at school](#)—Mr. Gendron by his own account had seemed to keep his plotting and extreme views largely hidden.

His tone flippant in some entries and rageful in others, Mr. Gendron posted his plans to a private channel on the messaging platform Discord. A few people had access to view the content, according to a person familiar with the matter.

"We took action against the server as soon as we became aware of it and removed all related content and the server in accordance with our policies against violent extremism," said a spokeswoman for Discord.

Mr. Gendron found his way to extreme online forums on the anonymous social platform 4chan when he felt bored during the pandemic, he wrote. He started on pages devoted to the outdoors, migrated to ones focused on guns and ultimately landed on a page that allows nearly unfettered discussion of white supremacy. 4chan didn't respond to an emailed request for comment.

In Mr. Gendron's Discord entries, which started last November, he recounted his childhood in this town of 5,000, saying he didn't have many friends, wasn't close to his family and felt isolated.

"I would like to say I had quite a normal childhood (<18) but that is not the case," he wrote, signifying his life up to 18.

Mr. Gendron is the oldest of three boys, according to neighbors. His parents, Paul and Pamela, are civil engineers who work for the New York State Department of Transportation, an agency spokesman said.

The boys played basketball in their driveway, and had a trampoline in the backyard, neighbors said. Mrs. Gendron would walk around the neighborhood for exercise, and Mr. Gendron would wave while tending to his property. By the front door there is a round cement tile bearing a boy's hand print, a heart, the year 2008 and the name Payton.

The parents didn't answer phone calls seeking comment and weren't at their home when a reporter visited Monday. One of Mr. Gendron's lawyers, Daniel Dubois, declined to comment on Tuesday.

In one diary entry, dated May 5 of this year, Mr. Gendron wrote that he competed on school swimming and soccer teams and, until Covid-19, volunteered as a firefighter. But he said over and over that he never fit in. In a separate entry, dated May 9, he wrote that serving as a youth leader in his Boy Scout troop was "the peak of my life," but "everything went bad after."

"It's not that I actually dislike other people, it's just that they make me feel so uncomfortable I've probably spent actual years of my life just being online," he wrote in the May 5 entry. "And to be honest I regret it. I didn't go to friend's houses often or go to any parties or whatever. Every day after school I would just go home and play games and watch youtube, mostly by my self [sic]."

While neighbors and those who interacted with him said Mr. Gendron seemed quiet and responsible, his behavior grew erratic in recent years. On the first day of his senior year at Susquehanna Valley High

School in 2020, he came to school wearing what appeared to be a full-body medical protective suit complete with gloves and gas mask. In his online journal, Mr. Gendron posted a photo of himself in class wearing the outfit. Later, he posted memes calling Covid a Jewish conspiracy.

He credited 4chan, where extremist views are expressed with few restrictions, with influencing him. In particular, he spent time on the platform's "politically incorrect" page that is known among analysts as a hub for spreading far-right ideology, including white supremacy.

"I only really turned racist when 4chan started giving me facts that they were intellectually and emotionally inferior," he wrote on May 5, referring to Black people.

Last spring, a teacher reported to school administrators that Mr. Gendron had written about wanting to carry out a shooting, a law-enforcement official said. The state police were called, and he was taken to a hospital for a mental-health evaluation before being released a day and a half later, according to Buffalo Police Commissioner Joseph Gramaglia.

Mr. Gramaglia said state and federal law enforcement didn't detect any further warning signs involving Mr. Gendron until Saturday's shooting.

"I spent 20 hours in a hospital's emergency room on 5/28/2021," Mr. Gendron wrote, in a post dated Dec. 9. "This was because I answered murder/suicide to the question 'what do you want to do when you retire?' on an online assignment in my Economics class."

Mr. Gendron wrote in his Discord logs that his time in the hospital was "one of my worst nights of my life" and called it a turning point.

"I got out of it because I stuck with the story that I was getting out of class and I just stupidly wrote that down," he wrote. "That is the reason I believe I am still able to purchase guns. It was not a joke, I wrote that down because that's what I was planning to do."

In a public letter, Superintendent Roland Doig said the local school district was "shocked and unspeakably saddened by the tragic, racially motivated hate crime that took place in Buffalo, New York on Saturday." Mr. Doig said the district is cooperating with law enforcement and wouldn't comment further.

By the time he was hospitalized, Mr. Gendron had already discovered racist theories online, and his hospital stay pushed him further toward action, he wrote.

He exhaustively discussed in his diary the "Great Replacement Theory," a white racist belief espoused by previous mass shooters and promoted on extremist online forums. It claims Jewish conspirators use Black people, immigrants and others to undermine whites. He also cited as a key motivation the 2019 attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which left 51 dead. That lone gunman, who promoted the replacement theory, had live-streamed his attack on [Facebook](#).

The Gendrons didn't show outward signs of trouble at home, erecting a tent and inviting neighbors and friends to a party last June when Payton Gendron graduated from school. Neighbors recalled Mr. Gendron saying he would follow in his parents' footsteps to become a civil engineer.

[A photo posted on his high school's Flickr account](#) shows Mr. Gendron and another individual driving in a black Toyota convertible festooned with balloons and a banner adorned with his name in a senior class parade.

After graduating, he briefly attended SUNY Broome community college during the fall semester of 2021 and spring semester this year, according to the school.

Mr. Gendron also worked for about four months this winter at the Conklin Reliable Market along the town's main road, but left around three months ago, according to store owner John Gage.

"He was a real quiet kid," Mr. Gage said. "Gave me two weeks' notice when he left. Never had any problems with him."

During this period, Mr. Gendron ruminated on Discord over his evolving plans for the coming attack. He wrote about browsing extreme corners of 4chan and Reddit every day. By early February, he wrote that he was skipping his college physics class to work on documents he planned to publish about his beliefs. Around that same time, he wrote about finding a location for a shooting that would let him "post this discord to all people I know and on 4chan so they can watch."

Mr. Gendron's hometown of Conklin is 96% white, according to the U.S. Census. Surrounding Broome County is 86% white. He considered attacking somewhere in Binghamton, the county seat, but decided there weren't enough Black people, he wrote in his Discord entries. He looked into targeting a Walmart in Rochester, N.Y., but ultimately settled on the Buffalo grocery store, because it would have a high concentration of Black people, he wrote.

Earlier this year, Mr. Gendron wrote, "I'll be honest I do fear the attack, fear of dying, fear of being unsuccessful, fear of the hero that stops me. I keep telling myself that this is the only way and emotionally I feel that there is another path, but logically I know that there is none."

All throughout, he recorded his path to violence. "I'm keeping previous information I thought was true in this discord to show my progress towards the truth," he wrote in early March.

His posts were laden with racist slurs and derogatory remarks. He posted pages and pages of anti-Semitic and racist memes, blaming Black and Jewish people for everything from crime to Covid. He attacked the concept of diversity as destructive, the Holocaust as a hoax and accused Jews of controlling the media.

Having zeroed in on the Tops Friendly Markets grocery store, he decided to scout it in person in March. He posted photos of the drive to Buffalo and crude maps he drew of the store, sketching them out on stationery from his father's public employees union. In one Discord entry, he wrote how he counted 45 Black people in the store when he went inside, and only eight white people. He noted 10 Black people outside the supermarket. Later that day, when he returned to study the layout some more, he was questioned by a security guard about why he kept wandering in and out.

"What are you doing?" the guard, who was Black, asked him, according to the Discord entry. Nervously, Mr. Gendron made up an excuse and walked back to his car.

"In hindsight that was a close call," he wrote.

Mr. Gendron complained in his diary about the ways online platforms shaped his views. "If I could go back maybe I'd tell myself to get the f— off 4chan...and get an actual life," he wrote in late April. Instead of abandoning the platforms, however, he dove deeper into racist doctrine online and continued to plot.

He spent pages discussing efforts to raise money and buy equipment for the attack, going to local flea markets to sell silver coins, clothing and camping equipment. He spent the money on guns, ammunition and other gear for the assault, including a helmet-mounted camera.

Earlier this year, he purchased a semiautomatic AR-15-style rifle that was legal in New York state. He posted photographs of his modification of the gun, so it could take 30-round magazines. Mr. Gendron wrote that he knew the magazines were illegal in New York.

	<p>He practiced shooting in the woods, and posted numerous photographs of himself with the gun or wearing the helmet and body armor.</p> <p>He devoted numerous entries to discussing what he had eaten and his caloric intake, stating that he needed to lose weight and get in shape for the attack.</p> <p>He often wrote about killing himself, but each time decided to press ahead with his plan, citing racist theories as his compulsion.</p> <p>Mr. Gendron initially planned to stream his attack to Facebook, the diary posts reveal. But in January he decided to switch to Twitch, stating he wanted to reach younger people and “only boomers actually have a Facebook account nowadays.”</p> <p>He made notes on Discord to send a link to the stream of his attack to every group and person he could remember. After distributing the link, it would be harder to back out, he reasoned. “Start the livestream and stick to the plan,” he wrote last month.</p> <p>The day before the shooting, Mr. Gendron posted a final series of entries. He discussed his last preparations and reviewed his equipment, including his rifle, on which he’d scrawled racial insults and the names of other white nationalist mass shooters.</p> <p>“This is where I’m gonna end it,” he wrote.</p> <p>He uploaded a photo of himself, standing in a wooded area, wearing camouflage. He was grinning.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Thieves return temple treasures in India
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/17/were-fed-up-with-scary-dreams-thieves-return-temple-treasures
GIST	<p>A gang of thieves have returned more than a dozen idols they stole from an ancient Hindu temple in India, saying they had been haunted by nightmares since the crime, according to police.</p> <p>Last week, the group stole 16 statues from a 300-year-old temple to Lord Balaji – an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu – in Uttar Pradesh, police inspector Rajiv Singh told Agence France-Presse.</p> <p>On Monday night, they left 14 of them near the house of the temple’s chief priest in Chitrakoot district, he said.</p> <p>“They also left behind a confession letter which said they were returning the idols because they were having scary dreams,” Singh said. The note begged for forgiveness.</p> <p>One of the idols was made of Asthadhatu, an alloy of eight metals, and weighed around 5kg. The haul also included silver ornaments used to decorate deities.</p> <p>The thieves have not yet been identified.</p> <p>In their Hindi-language confession letter, they said: “We have not been able to sleep, eat and live peacefully. We are fed up with the scary dreams and are returning your valuables.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 Dallas shooter had delusions on Asians
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/17/dallas-shooting-suspect-arrested-koreatown-hair-salon
GIST	<p>Authorities in Dallas said on Tuesday the man suspected of opening fire in a hair salon in the city’s Koreatown and wounding three women of Asian descent harbored delusions about Asian people since having a car crash involving an Asian man two years ago.</p>

Police identified the gunman as Jeremy Smith, 36, and said he has been charged with three counts of assault with a deadly weapon. Smith was booked early on Tuesday is being held in Dallas county jail.

The shooting is being investigated as a hate crime by the FBI along with the US attorney's office for the northern district of [Texas](#) and the civil rights division of the US Department of Justice.

Dallas police earlier arrested Smith in connection with the shooting , and federal officials are investigating the attack as a hate crime.

Dallas police chief Eddie Garcia has said the shooting at Hair World Salon could be connected to two other shootings at businesses run by Asian Americans.

The shooting in Dallas occurred a few days before a white gunman killed 10 Black people on Saturday at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, and a gunman authorities said was motivated by political hatred against Taiwan killed one person and wounded five on Sunday at a southern California church where mostly elderly Taiwanese parishioners had gathered.

Authorities have said a man dressed all in black opened fire at the Dallas salon, then drove off in a maroon minivan.

Garcia said investigators found that a similar vehicle was reported to be involved in two other recent shootings, including a drive-by on 2 April in the area where the salon is located. No one was injured in either of those shootings.

Garcia said the vehicle was also linked to a drive-by shooting on 10 May about 25 miles south-east of the shopping center where Wednesday's shooting happened.

The three women who were shot at the salon were taken to a hospital with injuries that weren't life-threatening.

Jane Bae, the daughter of one of the wounded women, told the Associated Press last week that her mother told her that the mystery shooter was calm.

"He was calm. He just walked up to it and then stood there – didn't walk around – but stood there and shot like 20 shots and then just calmly went out," said Bae, who wasn't there but had spoken with her mother.

The salon is in the heart of Koreatown, which transformed in the 1980s from an industrial area to a thriving district with shopping, dining, markets, medical offices and salons.

Anti-Asian violence has risen sharply in recent years. Last year, six women of Asian descent were among the eight killed in a shooting at massage businesses in and near Atlanta, heightening anger and fear among Asian Americans.

And the Manhattan district attorney, Alvin Bragg, announced hate crime charges relating to assaults by a suspect against seven Asian American women in New York City in February.

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HEADLINE	05/17 Buffalo shooter radicalized online
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/18/4chan-radicalize-buffalo-shooting-white-supremacy
GIST	Just weeks after 4chan motivated a quadruple shooting in Washington DC, the racist and conspiracy-oriented online message board probably inspired the killings of 10 at a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood of Buffalo over the weekend.

A 180-page manifesto, allegedly released by the accused along with a video of the attack, is rife with pseudo-scientific racism, antisemitic conspiracy theories and a call for others to mimic his violence. The screed is mostly plagiarized from other extremists and from the far-right 4chan.

The 18-year-old white man charged with carrying out the massacre – before turning himself over to police at the scene – wrote that “extreme boredom” drove him to 4chan in March 2020.

Payton Gendron first fell into logging on the message board daily when coronavirus-related lockdowns kept many in New York state indoors, according to the timeline in the manifesto. His family told the New York Post that isolation and paranoia inflicted by the pandemic made him snap – possibly a preview of Gendron’s legal defense.

Gendron faces first-degree murder charges, which the justice department says they may prosecute as hate crimes. Most of those slain were Black, including Aaron Salter, a security guard who tried to stop the shooting; local activist Katherine Massey; and substitute teacher Pearl Young.

The manifesto contains hundreds of racist and antisemitic memes borrowed straight from 4chan’s politics boards and spells out the philosophy behind the attacks: the racist myth that Democrats favor open immigration policies and high birthrates for Black people to “replace” Republican voters and seize control of America.

That so-called great replacement myth, sometimes more bluntly termed “white genocide theory,” has found particularly fertile ground in places like 4chan.

“We have seen (the great replacement myth) playing a greater role in mobilizing individuals to violence because it has a somewhat unique ability to foster a sense of emergency,” said Amarnath Amarasingam, assistant professor in the school of religion at Queen’s University and author of an upcoming book on the radicalizing power of conspiracy theories.

The manifesto details the baseless racism that underpins the philosophy, including the idea that Jewish people secretly control the world, and that the genetic differences between the races make them incompatible. One particular image, sourced from 4chan, claims to show “the truth about race” – compiling a handful of debunked, misunderstood, or cherry-picked studies to assert the claim that certain races are inferior to whites. The manifesto even seeks to back up its claims with the long-abandoned pseudoscience of phrenology, which studies the sizes and shapes of craniums.

While these claims have no basis in modern biology or sociology, they are established doctrine on 4chan, where even conversations on a board devoted to cooking frequently veer into racist slurs and junk race science. The popularity of these ideas on 4chan has bubbled up into the mainstream.

The great replacement myth has been endorsed, in various forms, by vlogger Nick Fuentes and neo-Nazi organization Patriot Front and by more establishment figures like Fox News host Tucker Carlson and Senate hopeful JD Vance.

In Discord chat logs believed to be written by Gendron, he writes, “I only really turned racist when 4chan started giving me facts.” Early in 2022 he explained that only 4chan – including the board dedicated to Nazi ideology – gave him the real news he sought. “White genocide is real when you look at data, but is not talked about on popular media outlets,” he wrote. He confessed to browsing 4chan daily and that he “barely interacts with regular people”.

4chan is also notorious for praising and deifying other mass shooters and white supremacist terrorists. Gendron’s alleged manifesto has ample evidence of their influence on him.

The document borrows heavily from another manifesto written in 2019 by Brenton Tarrant, who killed 51 at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Tarrant was also a frequent user of 4chan and its sister board, 8chan, according to a government report. Tarrant’s own manifesto, which was uploaded to

	<p>8chan before the attack, in turn plagiarized significantly from Anders Brevik, who murdered 77 in Norway in 2011 in an anti-immigrant spree.</p> <p>Brevik himself copy-and-pasted most of his manifesto directly from other anti-Islam sources, illustrating “the broader ideas behind the great replacement conspiracy theory have been around for some time within various far-right movements”, Amarasingam said.</p> <p>Besides Buffalo, both 4chan and 8chan have become politically significant forces in the US. Both boards helped form and foster QAnon, the far-right myth that Donald Trump is combating a cult of elite leftist pedophiles. The boards played a central role in constructing the lie that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Trump, which inspired the deadly Capitol riot on 6 January 2021.</p> <p>Then, last month, 23-year-old Raymond Spencer recorded himself shooting and wounding four people at random. He uploaded the footage to 4chan and continued posting right up until he committed suicide, as police closed in on him. A racist meme, popular on 4chan, was posted on the wall of the apartment Spencer used as a sniper’s nest.</p> <p>Gendron and Spencer’s cases vividly show how 4chan’s toxic culture can radicalize young men, according to Amarasingam.</p> <p>“You can hear it all over the Buffalo shooter’s manifesto – a deep sense of urgency that there is an imminent collapse of white people and white culture,” the professor said. “Combine all this with the furious nihilism, racism, and angst of 4chan and it all becomes deeply worrying.”</p>
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HEADLINE	05/17 King Co. Cannabis Safety Taskforce
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/cannabis-safety-task-force-king-county-robberies/281-7cad2b47-b6b5-4325-a128-509536768a68
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — On Tuesday, the King County Council voted to create a Cannabis Safety Taskforce in response to an increase in armed robberies targeting cannabis businesses.</p> <p>The task force is a step toward addressing the issue, but some business owners say it's already at a crisis level.</p> <p>The sign at Buddy's Recreational Cannabis has been a marker in Renton for the past six years. However, the security car parked at the entrance is new.</p> <p>"We're sitting ducks. We have a sign on the window that says no firearms so we have a lot of cash and no firearms, that's a good entrée to the people who have less than good thoughts," said store owner Myles Harlow Kahn.</p> <p>Like many other shops, they've been robbed. The first time was Dec. 30, 2021, and the second robbery happened ten days later. Prior to that, Kahn said they'd never had an issue.</p> <p>Now he's spending thousands on security.</p> <p>"It's a necessity. We have to keep our customers and staff safe," Kahn said.</p> <p>According to the Washington CannaBusiness Association, there have been roughly 70 reported robberies of marijuana businesses in the state of Washington since the beginning of 2022. Only two months ago an employee at a Tacoma pot shop was shot and killed during an armed robbery.</p> <p>The increase in violence is the reason the King County Council voted to create the Cannabis Safety Taskforce. Seven council members voted yes while two excused themselves from the vote.</p>

	<p>The goal of the task force is to identify resources to help police and cannabis shops. The task force will be comprised of representatives from the King County Sheriff's Office, the King County Prosecutor's Office, members of the cannabis industry and community members.</p> <p>Kahn says while dialogue is always good, there needs to be action.</p> <p>"I think the first thing that should happen is they should examine how to actually help us in the short term. The one suggestion I have is to give us a credit against the state cannabis tax for the increased security cost," Kahn said.</p> <p>As part of the task force, members will analyze how cannabis tax revenue is being used, which amounts to around \$4.6 million. That report will be finished by the end of August of this year.</p>
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HEADLINE	05/16 Gunman lonely, isolated; troubling sign
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/buffalo-supermarket-shooting-government-and-politics-race-ethnicity-978bddfec22344fe73e30ca34f491784
GIST	<p>CONKLIN, N.Y. (AP) — In the waning days of Payton Gendron's COVID-altered senior year at Susquehanna Valley High School, he logged on to a virtual learning program in economics class that asked: "What do you plan to do when you retire?"</p> <p>"Murder-suicide," Gendron typed.</p> <p>Despite his protests that it was all a joke, the bespectacled 17-year-old who had long been viewed by classmates as a loner with good grades was questioned by state police over the possible threat and then taken into custody and to a hospital for a psychiatric evaluation under a state mental health law.</p> <p>But a day and a half later, he was released. And two weeks after that, he was allowed to participate in graduation festivities, including riding in the senior parade, where he was photographed atop a convertible driven by his father and festooned with yellow-and-blue balloons and signs reading, "Congratulations" and "Payton Gendron."</p> <p>That account of Gendron's brush with the law last spring, according to authorities and other people familiar with what happened, emphasized the same point school officials made in a message to parents at the time: An investigation found no specific, credible threat against the school or any individual from that sign of trouble.</p> <p>Now, the episode is seen as a missed opportunity to uncover a sinister side of Gendron that he kept hidden from those around him. He became radicalized online, bought a Bushmaster rifle, traveled three hours to Buffalo and went on what authorities say was a racist, livestreamed shooting rampage Saturday in a supermarket that killed 10 Black people.</p> <p>Gendron, now 18, was arraigned on a state murder charge over the weekend and a court-appointed public defender entered a not guilty plea on his behalf. He remained jailed under suicide watch as federal prosecutors contemplate hate-crime charges.</p> <p>Even as the FBI swarmed the home where Gendron lived with his parents and two younger brothers, neighbors and classmates in this mostly white community of 5,000 near the New York-Pennsylvania line say they saw no sign of the kind of racist rhetoric seen in a 180-page online diatribe, purportedly written by Gendron.</p> <p>In it, he describes in minute detail how he researched ZIP codes with the highest concentrations of Black people, surveilled the Tops supermarket in Buffalo, and carried out the assault to terrorize all nonwhite, non-Christian people into leaving the country.</p>

Classmates described Gendron as a quiet, studious boy who got high marks but seemed out of place in recent years, turning to online streaming games, a fascination with guns and ways to grab attention from his peers.

When school partially opened again in 2020 after COVID-19-related shutdowns, Gendron showed up covered head to toe in a hazmat suit. Classmate Matthew Casado said he didn't think the stunt — he called it “a harmless joke” — went down well with other students.

“Most people didn't associate with him,” he said. “They didn't want to be known as friends with a kid who was socially awkward and nerdy.”

Gendron excelled in sciences, once earning top marks in a state chemistry competition. But he was known for keeping to himself and not talking much. And when he did talk, it was about isolation, rejection and desperation.

“He talked about how he didn't like school because he didn't have friends. He would say he was lonely,” said Casado, who graduated with Gendron last year.

At one point last winter, Gendron's mother called Casado's mother with a request: Please have Matthew call Payton because he had no friends and needed to talk.

The two boys ended up going to flea markets together, watching YouTube videos and shooting guns on nearby state land over the next few months. Casado said that he had never heard his friend talk of anything violent.

“I didn't think he would hurt a fly,” he said.

Some neighbors had a similar view, seeing the family as happy and prosperous, with both Paul Gendron and his wife, Pamela, holding stable jobs as civil engineers with the New York state Department of Transportation, earning nearly \$200,000 combined, according to online records.

Dozens of their Facebook posts over the years show the parents and their three boys — often dressed in matching outfits — enjoying amusement park vacations, going on boat trips and camping trips, shooting laser tag guns and opening presents on Christmas morning.

Carl Lobdell, a family friend who first met Gendron on a camping vacation a dozen years ago, said he was shocked that Payton was identified as the suspect in the mass shooting. “When I heard about the shooting ... I just cried,” he said.

One of Gendron's lawyers, Daniel DuBois, said Tuesday he had no comment. The family did not respond to a request for comment over the weekend. No one answered the door Monday at the family home, surrounded by a neat, spacious lawn. Near the front door was a tiny right hand pressed in concrete with a heart symbol and the words, “PAYTON 2008.”

One parent of a Susquehanna Valley High student said she was furious that the student who was investigated for making the threat last year — whom she later discovered was Gendron — was still allowed to participate in all graduation activities. The woman asked not to be identified because she feared harassment.

According to a recording of a conference call of federal and local law enforcement officials Monday that was obtained by The Associated Press, Buffalo Police Commissioner Joseph Gramaglia said Gendron's comments he made in school in June 2021 were “generalized statements” and not targeted at anyone in particular or at a specific location, which is why no criminal charges were filed. He said the state police “did everything within the confines of the law.”

Gendron enrolled at Broome County Community College and later dropped out. The school wouldn't say why. And according to online writings attributed to him, he began planning his assault on the Buffalo supermarket beginning at least in November, saying he was inculcated into his racist views online.

Payton Gendron talks with his attorney during his arraignment in Buffalo City Court, Saturday, May 14, 2022.

"I was never diagnosed with a mental disability or disorder, and I believe to be perfectly sane," according to one passage.

A new, 589-page document of online diary postings emerged Monday that authorities have attributed to Gendron. In it, he describes his preparations for the Buffalo supermarket shooting in detail, writing at one point that he considered attacking a predominantly Black elementary school instead. He also recounted how he chased down a neighborhood cat, stabbed and decapitated it with a hatchet, took a picture and then buried it in the backyard.

"Another bad experience was when I had to go to a hospital's ER because I said the word's 'murder/suicide' to an online paper in economics class," said one entry. "I got out of it because I stuck with the story that I was getting out of class and I just stupidly wrote that down. That is the reason I believe I am still able to purchase guns."

"It was not a joke, I wrote that down because that's what I was planning to do."

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HEADLINE	05/16 Buffalo gunman plotted attack for months
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/buffalo-supermarket-shooting-19514b0c6524bd428f4167ad9b490a12
GIST	<p>BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — The white gunman accused of massacring 10 Black people at a Buffalo supermarket wrote as far back as November about staging a livestreamed attack on African Americans, practiced shooting from his car and traveled hours from his home in March to scout out the store, according to detailed diary entries he appears to have posted online.</p> <p>The author of the diary posted hand-drawn maps of the grocery store along with tallies of the number of Black people he counted there, and recounted how a Black security guard at the supermarket confronted him that day to ask what he was up to. A Black security guard was among the dead in Saturday's shooting rampage.</p> <p>The diary taken from the chat platform Discord came to light two days after 18-year-old Payton Gendron allegedly opened fire with an AR-15-style rifle at the Tops Friendly Market. He was wearing body armor and used a helmet camera to livestream the bloodbath on the internet, authorities said.</p> <p>He surrendered inside the supermarket and was arraigned on a murder charge over the weekend. He pleaded not guilty and was jailed under a suicide watch. Federal authorities are contemplating bringing hate crime charges.</p> <p>Copies of the online materials were shared with The Associated Press by Marc-André Argentino, a research fellow at the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence.</p> <p>A transcript of the diary entries was apparently posted publicly sometime ahead of the attack. It was not clear how many people might have seen the entries. Experts said it was possible but unlikely the diary could have been altered by someone other than the author.</p> <p>The FBI's top agent in Buffalo, Stephen Belongia, indicated on a call with other officials Monday that investigators are looking at Gendron's Discord activity, citing posts last summer about body armor and</p>

guns and others last month in which he taunted federal authorities. Belongia gave no details in the call, a recording of which the AP obtained.

But in an April 17 post apparently by Gendron, he exhorted readers to kill agents from the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Messages seeking comment were left with Gendron's lawyers. No one answered the door at his family's home.

The violence spread grief and anger in Buffalo and beyond.

Former Buffalo Fire Commissioner Garnell Whitfield Jr., who lost his 86-year-old mother, Ruth Whitfield, in the shooting, asked how the country could allow its [history of racist killings](#) to repeat itself.

"We're not just hurting. We're angry," Whitfield said at a news conference with civil rights attorney Ben Crump and others. "We treat people with decency, and we love even our enemies."

"And you expect us to keep doing this over and over and over again — over again, forgive and forget," he continued. "While people we elect and trust in offices around this country do their best not to protect us, not to consider us equal."

The victims also included a man buying a cake for his grandson; a church deacon helping people get home with their groceries; and a supermarket security guard.

The online diary details a March 8 reconnaissance visit the writer made to Buffalo, about 200 miles (320 kilometers) from Gendron's home in Conklin, New York.

Buffalo Police Commissioner Joseph Gramaglia said at a news conference that there was information indicating Gendron was in Buffalo in March, but Gramaglia declined to say more.

The commissioner said numerous investigators are working to obtain and review Gendron's online postings.

"There's a lot of social that's being looked at, or that's being verified, captured," Gramaglia said. "Some of that takes warrants that have to be served on various social media platforms."

The author of the diary talked about checking out targets including the Tops Friendly Market and said a security guard asked what he was doing after his second visit of the day. He gave an excuse about collecting data and soon left — "a close call," he wrote.

A 180-page document purportedly written by Gendron said the attack was intended to terrorize all nonwhite, non-Christian people and [get them to leave the country](#). Federal authorities said they are working to confirm the document's authenticity.

Gendron had briefly been on authorities' radar last spring, when state police were called to his high school for a report that the then-17-year-old had made threatening statements.

Belongia, the FBI agent, said Gendron had responded to a question about future plans by saying that he wanted to commit a murder-suicide.

A December Discord post that Gendron apparently made said he had given that answer to a question about retirement in an economics class and ended up spending "one of the worst nights of my life" in a hospital.

Gramaglia said Gendron had no further contact with law enforcement after a mental health evaluation that put him in a hospital for a day and a half. On the call with Belongia, Gramaglia said state police "did everything within the confines of the law" at that time.

It was unclear whether officials could have invoked [New York's "red flag" regulation](#), which lets law enforcement, school officials and families ask a court to order the seizure of guns from people considered dangerous.

Federal law bars people from owning guns if a judge has determined they have a "mental defect" or they have been forced into a mental institution. An evaluation alone would not trigger the prohibition.

At the White House, President Joe Biden, who planned a visit Tuesday to Buffalo, paid tribute to the slain security guard, retired police officer Aaron Salter.

Salter fired repeatedly at the attacker, striking his armor-plated vest at least once before being shot and killed. Biden said Salter "gave his life trying to save others."

Authorities said that in addition to the 10 Black people killed, three people were wounded: one Black, two white.

Zeneta Everhart said her son, supermarket employee Zaire Goodman, was helping a shopper outside when he saw a man get out of a car in military gear and point a gun at him. Then a bullet hit Goodman in the neck.

"Mom! Mom, get here now, get here now! I got shot!" he told his mother by phone. Goodman, 20, was out of the hospital and doing well Monday, his mother said.

In livestreamed video of the attack circulating online, the gunman trained his weapon on a white person cowering behind a checkout counter, but said, "Sorry!" and didn't shoot. Screenshots purporting to be from the broadcast appear to show a racial slur against Black people scrawled on his rifle.

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HEADLINE	05/17 King Co. fails to comply with new jail law
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/times-watchdog/king-county-failed-to-comply-with-new-law-as-jail-deaths-spiked/
GIST	<p>If you met Li'ahnna Mathis, you knew she could sing.</p> <p>She had been a choir kid at South Kitsap High School, and developed a powerful voice that could be heard belting Beyoncé everywhere from inside the car to inside the DMV.</p> <p>"[She] would literally sing all day long, even talking to you ... she would sing it to you rather than talk it," said friend Tessa Gilweit.</p> <p>Mathis, 28, was one of those bright presences in a room — particularly when she performed in drag shows, friends remembered. Among her circle of chosen family in the LGBTQ+ community were friends' kids who knew her as Auntie Li Li. But Mathis also struggled. As a transgender woman, she had endured violence, homelessness and heartache over the years.</p> <p>She died by suicide last December after spending her last conscious moments in a King County Jail cell.</p> <p>Since Mathis' death, five more people have died in custody at the King County Jail or after being transferred to the hospital — at least three suicides and one overdose. In the first four months this year, the King County Jail system has seen more people die in custody than all of last year.</p> <p>The jail has logged 28 suicides, suicide attempts or attempts at self-harm so far this year. The unusual spike in jail deaths has family members, public defenders and advocates asking questions about conditions at the jail, which has seen severe understaffing, new COVID outbreaks and an uptick in its average daily population since the beginning of the year.</p>

But it's difficult to tell whether the deaths follow a pattern because King County has not complied with a 2021 state law requiring it to review and publicly post analyses of unexpected jail deaths within 120 days — leading to an information void around deaths that occurred last December or earlier.

The jail has not completed and posted any reviews of deaths that occurred inside the jail in 2021 and 2022. Nor have other jails statewide.

LGBTQ+ advocates are also pressuring the jail after a young, homeless transgender person died by suicide in the jail this past March. Damien Ortaga, 25, died less than three months after Mathis, who was being held at the jail on suspicion of violating a protection order.

"It's a human rights issue, it's a humanitarian issue," said Mahkyra Gaines with the Lavender Rights Project, a legal and social services nonprofit that advocates for Black, trans and gender-diverse peoples. "It's important to know what happens outside of the community's eye because so much abuse can happen outside of the public's view."

Severe understaffing

Earlier this year, King County public defenders and a union representative for corrections officers — unlikely allies in public safety politics — made a joint case to the King County Council that something at the jail was seriously wrong.

Understaffing had reached crisis levels and COVID cases were rising. This had led to people being locked in their cells for 23 hours a day and attorneys not being able to meet with their clients, public defenders told the council.

Corrections Guild President Dennis Folk said officers working overtime and double shifts were sleeping in empty jail cells because they didn't have time to go home. They were stressed and sick.

All of this has a trickle-down effect, according to Folk. Delays in medical or psychiatric care were also tied to a lack of corrections staff, he told The Seattle Times.

"We're unable to provide the very basic care to the inmates in our custody," Folk told the council in early February. "I have spoken to both incarcerated inmates and to our jail medical staff and psychiatric staff and they feel that we are failing and more needs to be done."

In March, King County paid \$750,000 to settle a lawsuit filed by the family of a man who killed himself in the King County Jail, which alleged the jail didn't take adequate suicide prevention measures. Last year, a King County Auditor's Office report urged the jail to take up more suicide prevention efforts after finding that of four jail suicides between 2017 and 2020, none took place in cells for people at risk of harming themselves.

Before Ortaga's death this year, a judge had ordered Ortaga be released from jail at 5 p.m. March 9, pending an evaluation from a mental health crisis responder. The jail said it didn't receive the evaluation by that time, so Ortaga remained in lockup, and was found unresponsive the next day.

Data from the King County Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention show that corrections officer vacancies are higher in 2022 than they have been for the last two years. The jail now has 85 vacant corrections officer positions, compared with 20 vacant positions just a year ago.

The average daily population at the jail has also increased this year. King County data shows that the average daily population as of April 26 was 1,553 — down from pre-pandemic population numbers that hovered around 1,900, but the highest since pandemic restrictions were first put in place.

King County Council Chair Claudia Balducci, former head of the DAJD, said she was uncomfortable putting restrictions on booking certain felonies, which the county's Department of Public Defense has recommended as a way to cut the jail population.

But Balducci did say that each jail death needed to be thoroughly analyzed for potential trends.

"I need to see what the jail finds, and then we need to look and see if there are systemic things that need fixing."

John Diaz, current director of the DAJD, said his department has implemented hiring bonuses — \$15,000 for officers with experience, \$7,500 for those without — and is hiring a consultant to look at different staffing models to help with vacancies. The jail is also retrofitting bunks that have been used by people in the jail to hang themselves, though that work is not complete, Diaz said.

Diaz, who is retiring in June, suggested that some of the increase in deaths could be due to mental health issues exacerbated by the pandemic. The isolation of a single bunk during COVID could also be a risk factor, he said.

"It's not a surprise to anybody that we have a lot of people in our community, not just here, but throughout the country that's really suffered from issues of mental health, addiction, homelessness," Diaz said. "Frankly, there's a lot of these safety nets that just had not worked for many people and those are the people that we're seeing here."

New law, no teeth

Until very recently, Washington jails were never required to make information about in-custody deaths public.

Instead, jails voluntarily provided information to the federal government, which then published statewide statistics. Jails across the state defined in-custody deaths differently, leading to inconsistent measures of statewide mortality rates.

Much of the information about people who have died in jails has come out in civil lawsuits or the occasional federal intervention.

In 2006, a federal Department of Justice investigation into conditions at the King County Jail found that it had failed to protect people inside from self-harm and provide adequate medical care, which likely contributed to at least one death. The investigation also criticized the jail's internal investigations.

The Justice Department settled with the county in 2009, but deaths in King County facilities have persisted.

A 2019 investigation by Oregon Public Broadcasting, the Northwest News Network and radio station KUOW found that at least 70% of people who died in jail custody in Washington and Oregon jails since 2008 were awaiting trial and hadn't been convicted of a crime.

Suicide comprised more than half of the deaths with known causes, and a third of all deaths occurred within the first three days of lockup, according to the investigation. Another report from Columbia Legal Services found that more than 200 people had died in Washington jails between 2005 and 2016.

Following the reports, state legislators in 2021 required fatality reviews within 120 days of unexpected deaths in jail custody. But nearly a year later, the King County Jail has still not completed and posted a single fatality review, even as seven people, including Mathis, have died of suicide, overdose or undetermined causes in the jail since then.

Diaz said he was not aware of the new law's requirements until The Seattle Times notified him.

“I was not aware of the law about posting,” Diaz said, though he insisted that the jail was conducting fatality reviews.

“I want to know why and how she was even able to [kill] herself,” Mathis’ friend Jennifer Titterness told The Seattle Times. “Why and how? You shouldn’t be able to do that.”

It’s also unclear whether other jails across the state are conducting or completing the required fatality reviews. As of early May, the Department of Health said it had not received any reviews from any jail within the state.

“My initial reaction is this is a problem,” said Sen. Rebecca Saldaña, D-Seattle, one of the co-sponsors of the new law. “Is that because there’s no enforcement?”

No outside review

A decade ago, the Snohomish County Jail saw a rash of deaths in custody — eight in three years. The Snohomish County Sheriff’s Office asked the federal government through the National Institute of Corrections to come in and review its jail procedures, leading to reforms around staffing and medical care.

“Once this pattern [of deaths] starts to develop I think there’s a symptom that there’s something broken,” said Cheryl Snow, a civil rights lawyer who sued Snohomish County over three jail deaths, winning settlements worth at least \$5.5 million.

King County has not requested a similar review. Instead, it relies on its own staff, the Seattle and Kent police departments and public health officials to investigate individual deaths.

“You wonder why here they’re not doing it,” Snow said. “You’d like to see them take that step and somebody explain why they’re not asking for outside review.”

While Diaz said his department reviews in-custody deaths thoroughly, not only has his department not complied with the new law it hasn’t asked for outside help. Li’ahnna Mathis’ 120-day fatality review deadline came and went in April, with no review published.

“It’s infuriating,” Titterness, Mathis’ friend, said. “She doesn’t deserve to be lost. She was a valuable human and this world is darker because of it.”

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